

THE DRACULA HORROR SERIES #7

523-220508-6★\$1.25

Dracula's Lost World

Dracula's quest for gold
in an undiscovered,
uncivilized land.

by Robert Lory



SANTOS WAS AFRAID . . .

. . . Afraid of this young woman who was so much wiser than her years, this strange wife of his who had such peculiar eyes.

Wife. She *was* his wife, he reminded himself. Why should a man fear the woman he was wed to? Especially when that man was Santos, one whose name other men feared even to speak. He had seen men turn as white as a death's head when Santos had shown but a small fraction of his displeasure.

He had built his reputation that way. He had killed men for trivial infractions—to keep the living in line. With a flick of his wrist he had sent knives slamming into the eyes or open mouths of offenders. He was savage, a man to be feared. A man who killed at whim. Yet this strange young woman was beginning to make him afraid . . .

The Dracula Series

- #1 DRACULA RETURNS**
- #2 THE HAND OF DRACULA**
- #3 DRACULA'S BROTHERS**
- #4 DRACULA'S GOLD**
- #5 DRUMS OF DRACULA**
- #6 THE WITCHING OF DRACULA**
- #7 DRACULA'S LOST WORLD**

DRACULA'S LOST WORLD

by
Robert Lory

PINNACLE BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

DRACULA'S LOST WORLD

Copyright © 1974 by Lyle Kenyon Engel

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form.

An original Pinnacle Books edition, published for the first time anywhere.

ISBN: 0-523-00508-3

First printing, December 1974

Printed in the United States of America

PINNACLE BOOKS, INC.
275 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10016

DRACULA'S LOST WORLD

Where? *Where?* In truth, I have asked myself that question in the many days and nights which separate this time from the time of the adventures of which I write. Where was that golden city? *Where?* And, although I ask and ask again that single question, I am more convinced as the years wear on that Providence has smiled upon me by keeping the answer hidden. Unfortunate indeed is that man unto whom the answer is revealed; for should he find himself within all that golden magnificence, he shall also find himself within the realm of that Ungodly Horror!

—from *My Adventures in the Savage New Landes*
by Sir Giles Stanby.

Published in London, 1716

CHAPTER ONE

It was slightly before eleven at night.

Through the concrete canyons of Manhattan the wind whistled and whined, carrying the icy rain in scattered and unpredictable paths that ended in arrow-sharp discomfort on the soft surfaces of exposed flesh that had dared to defy the fury of this sudden April storm. There had been, earlier, a forecast of snow, but it had not come to pass. And earlier, the man who led the woman from the security of the heated taxi and assisted her up the stone stairs of the Seventy-Ninth Street apartment house had been glad that there had been no snow. But now he wished the forecast had

been accurate. Snow—the white fresh snow of winter on its last breath—had in it a purity, a cleanliness. This rain and the wind tonight seemed to laugh at the discomforts it caused him—in this wind and rain there was something of blackness, something that tonight, unlike the rains and winds of other nights, seemed to contain something of evil, of death. And, as he opened the outside door and the woman quickly moved into the small vestibule, the man couldn't quite shake off the feeling of a doom that might be awaiting himself and his wife of more than twenty-seven years. He looked at her now, this thin man in his fifties. His wife Elaine. In the ghostly light of the dimly lit hall she looked—she looked as if she were a corpse.

“The key, Wesley,” the woman said. But she did not look into his eyes. Was she avoiding them? Did she feel as he did, did she sense . . .

“The key,” she repeated.

Wesley Thurlow nodded. “Of course, the key.” He fumbled in his overcoat pockets, then he realized that it had been in his hand already, had been there in fact since he'd paid the taxi driver. He simply wasn't thinking straight tonight, not at all. It was the rain, the wind . . .

“Wesley . . .”

“Yes. Of course.” Hastily, he inserted the key into the lock and turned it. The click seemed overly loud to him. No, it didn't seem loud at all. He really couldn't hear it, not with the rain beating against the glass of the outside door, not with the wind.

“Wesley, please,” his wife said urgently. “I'm very tired. Can't you wait until we're in bed to do your thinking?”

He opened the door and let her pass into the cor-

ridor. He smiled briefly and nodded for her benefit. She had the wrong idea. Based on past experience, she thought naturally enough that his mind was occupied with what had been discussed at the little faculty gathering they had attended this night. She did not like these gatherings much, but she knew that sitting through them, occasionally uttering a clever tidbit, was the duty of one such as herself, the wife of a visiting professor at Columbia, especially the wife of a visiting professor in the nowadays not overly popular subject of Latin American studies.

There was a chill in the corridor this night. There was always a chill, it was true, the management cutting whatever corners it could these days to make whatever profit it could. Dr. Wesley Thurlow sympathized with the management. These were not especially easy times, economically speaking. On the other hand, he did not like to be cold. Yet, this night the cold was something more than the usual cold. Just as, outside, the dark was something more than the usual dark.

“Wesley?”

His head jerked up. His wife was at the elevator, the sliding door already open. He still stood by the door they had just come through.

“Is something the matter, Wesley?” She looked concerned. Probably she *was* concerned. No doubt, either tonight or in the morning, she would again lecture him about working too hard. It would be a familiar lecture and one that he knew he deserved. He only hoped, now as he stepped into the elevator, that . . .

That he would be alive to hear it.

As the woman pressed the button numbered four, the man shuddered. A strange thought, that. Hoping that he would be alive in the morning. All these years

he had taken life for granted. There would always be a tomorrow. He knew, of course, that men younger than he were dropping off like flies from heart failure, but that was not the thought he had tonight. No, it was something other than death by natural causes that concerned him. The darkness, the wind, the rain . . .

The elevator stopped at their floor. The door opened. "I love you, Elaine," he said suddenly.

She looked at him strangely. "I'm glad to hear that, Wesley."

"No, I mean it."

She somehow sensed the urgency in his tone. "I know you mean it. Wesley, is something the matter? Is something wrong? Did I do or say something tonight that you didn't like, or—"

"No. Nothing like that. It's just . . . just . . ." He smiled weakly. "Let's go inside. We'll feel more comfortable once we've had a chance to dry ourselves and get into some warm pajamas."

She took his arm as they walked to the end of the hall, passing closed doors on each side of the corridor. "I hope you're right, Wesley," she said. "It's odd, but you know, I've had the strangest feeling that something is wrong tonight. Not with me, not with you, but here—here in the house. Perhaps . . ."

But she stopped. Already his key was in the lock. Already the door was opening. But that was not what made her stop. It was the look on her husband's face, the way his eyes turned to her. There was a strange look in his eyes. They were eyes that had seen something in the blackness beyond the door. Something. Something like death.

"Wesley?" she asked.

But it was not her husband who answered. It was a

voice that came from inside the dark apartment. A strongly accented voice, a woman's voice:

"Come inside, both of you. Please. Kindly do as I say—or *you both will die where you stand!*"

Run! She felt the word slam into her brain. They must run! She reached out a hand toward her husband's arm, to try to communicate this plan to him by touch, by the intensity of the look in her eyes. But *his* eyes—they no longer were looking at her. They were focusing on something in the room, something that Elaine Thurlow knew she must not look upon, but something that she knew had claimed her husband. As he stepped forward, she moved toward him as if to block his passage from the hallway into the interior. It was then that from the corner of her eye she saw it.

It was bright gold, not large but somehow shining. Some kind of small pendant, gently moving as if it were a pendulum. It caught her eye, it caught her focus. Then she knew—it had caught *her*.

"Enter," the voice said from the darkness.

Elaine Thurlow obeyed the command. She could not do otherwise because she had no power to defy that bright, shining golden thing. She knew somewhere in the back of her mind that she should run, that she should try to drag her husband from this, from their home. But she knew that it would be impossible. She knew that his eyes, like hers, were staring at that golden disc.

"Into the library," the female voice directed them, and again they obeyed as the disc moved before them toward that room. A gooseneck lamp was lighted on the desk top, another lamp on a small reading table was also on. Still, the light in the room seemed to Elaine

Thurlow to be shrouded by some heavy gloom, seemed to cause strange shadows to dart among the walls, especially on the crowded bookshelves, which formed one full wall of the room. As she and her husband sat, she saw now that three of the shadows had more substance than the other, little ones. She heard the gasping intake of her husband's breath, heard her own join his.

Two of the shadows appeared to be men, one thin and wiry, the other a giant of a man. Their faces were strange-looking, there seemed to be no features at all on the surfaces as if—no, there *were* features; but they were covered with something. Stockings, yes, that's what they were. Stockings like thieves wore in the movies. But what was there here that thieves would possibly want?

It was the third intruder, the woman with the pendant, who supplied the answer:

"Where is it, Dr. Thurlow—the treasure book of Giles Stanby?"

The girl with the accented voice was young, Elaine Thurlow could see that in the lamplight. She wore no mask, and thus the cruelty of her sharp-lined face was fully evident. Like the others her clothes were dark, perhaps black. Black like the woman's hair and eyes, eyes that narrowed as they looked over the chain-dangled pendant into the eyes of Wesley Thurlow.

The scholar shook his head. "It is not here," he said.

"That, Dr. Thurlow, is a lie," the girl countered. "Your office at the university has been thoroughly searched. It must be here in this room somewhere." Her voice grew as cold as the night outside. "I will have that book this night. It is my right and my heritage. Make the transfer painless, Dr. Thurlow. You have that option."

Two thick hands moved to Thurlow's shoulders. The giant who owned them laughed. "Perhaps, if the senor were to receive a sample of the pain that could—"

"No," the girl countered. She smiled down at the scholar. "My friend, who is called El Cobra, lacks the proper amount of finesse. He also lacks patience, however, as does my other friend."

There was a clicking sound. Neither of the two elderly people could miss seeing the sharp-tipped spine of bright steel that now extended from the smaller man's fist.

"This is Santos," the woman said. "He enjoys working with his little knife. Please, now, I ask you not to try either of my friends' patience—or mine. The book, Dr. Thurlow. Simply tell me where it is."

They're going to kill us! The thought came to Elaine Thurlow with crystal clarity. She knew it, knew it because otherwise they would not have been told the names of the two men. They were going to die—because of some book. But what book? Which of the old and battered volumes jammed into those unruly shelves . . .

And then she knew what book. The "treasure book," that's what the girl with the pendant had called it. Yes, *that* book. Her husband had been ridiculed by his colleagues for his theories based on that book. And now—now were they to die for it?

"The book is not here," Wesley Thurlow said.

"Perhaps," the one called Santos said—he had the voice of a weasel—"perhaps he is telling the truth. We, after all, could not find it, and we have looked with care. Perhaps in a strong box somewhere, he has—"

"No," the woman said. "The book is here. I feel it is. It is here, is it not, Dr. Thurlow?"

Again her eyes hardened, stabbing into the older man's eyes, gazing over the still-swinging pendant that flashed out message-reflections of the lamplight. Elaine Thurlow's heart almost stopped beating when she heard her husband answer in a dull voice:

"Yes. It has been here."

"Then you will tell me where. Precisely where."

"No."

The one called El Cobra laughed again. "He is strong willed, no?" His question was punctuated by a heavy palm that cracked like thunder across the left cheek of the old scholar, the other hand stopping the stricken man from catapulting from his chair.

"Stop it!" Elaine Thurlow yelled, jumping to her feet.

"Sit, old woman," the one called Santos said dangerously. The sharp steel spine moved forward. "Sit and merely watch."

Again the beefy hand of El Cobra swung back.

"No," the woman with the golden disc said. "Not unless it proves necessary. Dr. Thurlow does not want that—do you, Doctor?"

"The book is not here. Someone else has it."

"Who, Doctor?"

Wesley Thurlow shook his head. "It's ironic, you know. No one believed me when I wrote of my findings. And now . . ." He laughed brittlely. "No, I'll not have another's death result from—" He broke off his words, as if suddenly realizing their import. He turned to his wife of many years. For her he had a single word:

"Run!"

Then with a mighty effort he rose and lunged at the giant who stood before him. Rose, lunged and, after the sharp impact of the blow he received to the side of

his head, crashed face first into the wall of books.

Elaine Thurlow screamed, then fled the room. She screamed again as she collided with the wall in the entranceway and fumbled at the door leading to the hall. She had it open just a fraction when her next scream was cut off midway by the steel needle that whistled through the air and pinned her throat to the wood of the door panel. Her forehead struck the door and closed it from the force. Her body jerked twice, the second time removing the poniard tip from its wooden lodging. She was dead before she slumped to the thick-piled carpet that covered the entryway floor.

The thin man whose name was Santos collected his knife and returned hurriedly to the library. There, a glazed-eyed Dr. Thurlow sat propped up against the stacks, his eyes blankly focused on the golden pendant. He was speaking, then he stopped.

The eyes of the woman blazed as she turned triumphantly to the two men. "You see? My way was best. We now know where the book is."

"That is true," El Cobra said. "But you were wrong. The book, it is not here."

Santos' ears caught movement in the corridor. "It would be best to hurry."

The woman nodded, her smile turning most cruel. Her eyes flicked from El Cobra to the dazed scholar. "Finish him."

The heel of a palm flashed downward swiftly. There was a sharp crack, and Wesley Thurlow's neck was broken. Grunting his satisfaction, the Cobra moved after the other two to and through the doorway to the hall. At the woman's urging, they moved swiftly, not even bothering to acknowledge the presence of three of the four people who, in pajamas and dressing robes,

now stood in sleepy curiosity in the corridor. The fourth, however, stood just before the elevator, and El Cobra viewed him as an impediment to progress.

"*Por favor!*" he sang out with a laugh, his stiffened hands crashing into the man's chest and left temple. The open-mouthed victim sagged downward as the elevator sprang into action, the door closing behind the three intruders.

The other three—the pajama-clad tenants of the building's fourth floor—stood there, also with open mouths. But there was nothing now to see, nothing to hear. Nothing except the *whir* of the elevator and the whistling wind outside that drove the icy April rain against the stone and glass surfaces that before always had served to protect them from the elements of the night.

CHAPTER TWO

The rain that pummeled Manhattan was part of a storm covering a large portion of the Eastern seaboard, including most of Long Island. In his bedroom on the third floor of his employer's thirty-five room Westhampton manor, Cameron Sanchez listened to the rain and the winds as they howled through the thick branches of pine that completely surrounded the great house—cascades of water and moans of air that almost, but not quite, drowned out the crashings of the surf that continuously punished the island's southern shoreline some fifty yards from his window.

He lay flat on his back, this man in his early thirties,

whose now-naked six-foot five-inch frame of steellike muscle lifted slightly so that his bullet-shaped head—hairless except for thick black eyebrows—could turn toward the night table to his left, so that his black eyes could focus on the luminous dial of the large silver watch facing him.

The rough, chiseled lines of his face grew taut. It was one-fifteen in the morning.

Damn it.

Another sleepless night, he could see it coming. It wasn't so much the storm; he'd slept through plenty of them in this room. No, he knew what it was. The dreams, and their cause—the thing down in the basement laboratory of the manor. And a sense of foreboding. For himself and for his employer, Professor Damien Harmon.

Cam Sanchez was not a man who was easily scared. During his cut-short career as a member of the New York City police force, his fearlessness was just this side of recklessness. Then, later, when he had joined forces with Harmon, there had been times when his body and soul had walked the thin, wavering line between life and death. There had been little in the way of fear in him in those days. But then came that trip across the ocean, to the little Romanian village of Arefu—and the trip back with the deadly cargo. That was when the unsettled state of Cam's world began, but shortly thereafter there came an unexpected respite. A wager was made, one that Harmon won, one that had as its prize six months of servitude. The Black Master would serve Damien Harmon for that long. They had been an active and hazardous six months, spent here in the United States, in Romania again, in Jamaica and, most recently, in Germany. Just two weeks previous, in

fact, they had returned from the wildest yet of their adventures, one he would be reminded of every time he saw the still-scarlet letter S that had been burned into his right shoulder.

Active, hazardous, wild. But the real point was that as of April 1 the six months were over. The period of grace had been depleted, and now . . .

The rain and the wind and the crash of the surf. Even Nature herself seemed to know, seemed to sense that the end of their run was coming. The very way the branches of pine scraped the exterior of the house this black night, scratching, pounding . . .

No, the pounding was too irregular. Someone was—

“Someone is at the door,” the woman said. She stood in the open doorway of Cam’s room, her pale, beautiful oval-shaped face transmitting no emotion, her yellow-green eyes, however, shining like those of a sleek cat. A black cat whose color matched that of the tight-fitting sweater and slacks she wore and that of the silky shoulder-length hair that bordered her cheeks.

“Who?” he asked, rising but not bothering to cover up his nudity as he stepped into his trousers. “It’s late. Who would be out here this time of night?”

She did not respond immediately. Instead she waited until it was obvious to her that he did not intend to put on anything other than his trousers. “You’ll need your shoes,” she said. “A sweater and jacket as well.”

“I’m going somewhere?”

Her face remained a blank. “I will awaken the professor,” she said. And then she was gone.

The pounding on the door grew louder as Cam, his feet shod in moccasins, a thick turtleneck sweater hugging his upper body, reached the handle. Through the one-way glass to the side of the door, he could see

them. Two men, both drenched and freezing, both with taut expressions on their faces. He recognized neither of the men personally, but he knew them, knew what they were. As he opened the door, they confirmed it.

"Police." A badge showed for an instant, then was shoved into an overcoat pocket. One of the men, the larger and wearier-looking of the two, said dully. "Your name is Cameron Sanchez?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "You'll come with us, please."

"What's this about, Officer?"

The man who had spoken shook his head. "That'll come later. You come now."

It was Cam's turn to shake his head. "Maybe I'd better have another look at that badge. Just to be sure."

The badge is real, Mr. Sanchez. They are what they say they are.

The big Puerto Rican looked behind him. A large black cat with yellow-green eyes seemed not to notice what was happening. Cam knew better. To the first message was added a second: *The professor will effect your release as soon as possible.*

The second policeman now was going through the motions of informing the man being picked up for questioning that he had the right to have a lawyer present if he wished, that anything he said could and probably would be used against him.

"There is a charge . . . a formal charge?" Cam asked. But before the policeman could respond, the word slammed into the frontal lobes of the Puerto Rican's brain.

The cat's eyes stared straight into his as he turned to be sure he'd gotten the message straight.

The word was *murder*.

"Well, well, well—look who's here!"

The thick-bodied man behind the desk wore civilian clothing and a one-sided smile on his beefy, red-veined face. "It's been a real while, Sanchez, but don't think I haven't been thinking about you now and then."

Detective Lieutenant Hank Navarre started to stand, then thought better of it. "Sit him down," he said to the two policemen who had brought Cam to the downtown Manhattan station. "Then go get yourselves some coffee. I want this pigeon to myself."

The two men looked at Cam hesitantly. His eyes flickered only instantly, but something behind them was enough to make them release their grip. He sat down under his own power in the chair across from the scarred desk of the lieutenant. The door closed noiselessly, leaving the two men alone.

"I told you I would get you, Sanchez. Remember?"

Cam said nothing, but he remembered. He remembered all too well—both times. The first had been four years ago, when it had been Sergeant Navarre and Patrolman Sanchez, a tough rookie that the mob had decided was a bit too effective in his work in Spanish Harlem. From the very beginning of it—from the finding of the planted heroin in Cam's squad car, through the investigation and his discharge from the force and the trial that followed—Hank Navarre had been relentless. "When a cop screws up, boy," he'd told Cam, "it's the job of other cops to clean up the mess. I'm gonna see you behind bars for a long, long time."

And well he might have, had it not been for the old professor in the wheelchair who had used his immense wealth and the full power of the law to free the Puerto Rican giant. But Navarre had not forgotten, as he had

had the opportunity to let Cam know some four months ago. Then, too—during the besieging of the United Nations by the death-bats—Navarre again had pursued his quarry relentlessly, almost getting Cam and others killed in the process. Yes, Cam Sanchez remembered. He remembered now with a venomous scowl on his face.

“It’s late, Lieutenant. Say your piece.”

“You’re a killer, Sanchez.”

“Prove it.”

“I notice you don’t deny it. You don’t deny you’re a killer.”

Cam smiled in spite of himself. No, he would not deny the truth. Why bother?

“And I, on my part, Navarre, notice you haven’t specified just who it is I’m supposed to have killed. And when.”

The policeman looked down at a scribbled note before him. “A Dr. and Mrs. Wesley Thurlow. Tonight at approximately eleven-ten.”

“I was all snug in my bed at that hour. I can prove it.”

Navarre smiled nastily. “I suppose you had company? Maybe that girlfriend of yours—what’s her name?”

“Her name is Ktara,” Cam replied levelly. “But repeat that slur about her—or any other—and you’ll be picking teeth out of the back of your throat.”

Navarre jumped up, slamming his fist on the desk. He was about to blurt out something, then thought better of it. With a controlled movement he sat back down again. The same control was in evidence when he smiled.

“No, Sanchez, I’m not going to get riled over this,

not one bit. But I'll simply say that your girlfriend's alibi won't get you anywhere. You see, we know she was right there with you."

"You know?" Cam said calmly.

"Witnesses. Four of them, including the man you almost killed while you were leaving the place. All of them say the same thing. A young black-haired woman dressed in black and a giant of a man who was very effective with his hands and spoke a bit of Spanish. Plus a third, a man you might like to identify for us. In the interest of saving time, I mean . . . Don't worry, we'll get him too."

"This man," Cam said, "the large one who spoke Spanish—he looked like me? What else except size and a few words have you got that ties him to me?"

Navarre's smile widened. "You weren't all that smart, Sanchez. Wearing a stocking mask, I mean. Normally that would be a fairly good cover-up, but in your case—well, let me put it to you this way: Do you think any of the four witnesses will have one bit of trouble picking you out of a lineup?"

Cam thought about it. Navarre was right, especially since the composition of the lineup would include only one man of the right size—himself—surrounded by a bunch of short, fat drunks, no doubt.

Navarre seemed to like the expression on the Puerto Rican's face. "There's something else. The woman made the mistake of calling you by name. Two of the witnesses heard it, although one of them thinks it was Santos or something like that. I'm sure he'll get it right—eventually. Now, why not come clean and tell me why you did it?"

Cam began a smile. "No motive, Lieutenant?"

You've got your suspects, but no motive?"

"Not yet, no. But that'll come. In the meantime, while we find it, you can cool your criminal heels in one of our less than luxurious cells. What do you say to that?"

Cam was thinking about exactly what he had to say about that, when the door to Navarre's office opened. It was one of the officers who had escorted him into the city. "Lieutenant, I think you'd better step out here a minute. There's a Mr. Proctor—"

The crash of Navarre's fist on the desk was louder this time than before. Cam met the lieutenant's furious eyes with a full smile. As he rounded the desk, Navarre's voice was determined. "Not this time, boy, I promise you you're not getting off this time. I don't care what kind of influential friends you've got."

He didn't wait for a response, but slammed the office door behind him. It didn't take very keen ears for Cam to hear the subdued anger from the outer office. The conversation, however, lasted no more than five minutes. The door opened.

It was a defeated Navarre who stood in the doorway, but there was venom in his tone. "It appears you can go now. But you'll be back, Sanchez, I promise you that. I'll even give you a warning. Watch what you do very carefully. Be sure to look over your shoulder every move you make. One of my men will be there. You can tell that to your lady friend, too."

Cam rose and crossed to the doorway. For an instant the two men locked eyes, then the beefy policeman moved to let the big Puerto Rican pass.

In the outer office, a round man with sparse and fading hair, well dressed, and still spry for his sixty-plus years, extended a hand to Cam. "My car is outside,"

Sanford Proctor said. "Sorry I'm late. There were some things I wanted to pick up for Damien."

"Your timing was perfect, Mr. Proctor," Cam said, taking the hand and returning its strong grip. He did not bother asking what the "things" were that the thick-bodied friend of Damien Harmon had "picked up." As they walked out into the night of cold wind and rain, he knew he'd be hearing about them shortly. And something deep down in the pit of his stomach told him he wouldn't much like what he'd be hearing.

He was not, however, prepared for what he heard as he opened the door on the passenger side of Proctor's Continental. Nor did Proctor himself seem to be.

"Mr. Sanchez," said the woman who detached herself from the shadows next to the precinct house.

"Miss—Ktara, isn't it?" Proctor asked.

"Good evening, Mr. Proctor. Professor Harmon is eager to see you. You are going out there now?"

"I had planned to, yes. Myself and Mr. Sanchez."

"No. Mr. Sanchez and I have some business in the city. I've brought the car in from the Island."

Sanford Proctor nodded and slid behind the wheel of his car. He was about to close the door when the woman spoke to him again.

"You may tell Professor Harmon that if he wishes to know more of what Dr. Thurlow was working on he should consult his own bookshelves."

As the taillights of the large Lincoln winked out of sight, Cam asked Ktara what she was referring to.

"Later," she said, herself moving behind the wheel of one of the two special vehicles kept at the manor, this one a sleek black Cadillac. "At this moment all I wish to do is to enter the murder apartment. There may be some answers there."

"Nice of you—to concern yourself with my problem," he said.

She started the motor of the big car. "It is more than simply your problem, Mr. Sanchez. Much more."

Yes, he'd forgotten for the moment that she too was under suspicion.

"No," she said, reading his thought clearly. "My involvement is but a small part of it. *He* also is involved."

There was no need to ask which *he* she was referring to. The very way she pronounced the name said it all. Cam Sanchez concentrated on the motion of the windshield wipers before him. It helped contain the chill that had started to move down his spine.

CHAPTER THREE

The clock on the mantel in the large first-floor study of the Westhampton manor said four forty-five. Damien Harmon shifted his wheelchair from the desk that contained the clippings his friends had brought him and looked thoughtfully at the flickering flames in the great stone fireplace across the room. His half-closed eyelids gave his hawklike face the look of meditation, an expression that was not fully compatible with the normal aura of this man who, though in his mid-sixties, was nonetheless a man of action.

Sanford Proctor, a half-filled glass of expensive cognac in his hand, scrutinized his friend carefully.

Harmon looked perplexed, surely an uncomfortable and unusual condition for this man who had earned a master's degree and two doctorates before he had reached his mid-twenties. A man of much knowledge was Damien Harmon, a man of immense wealth and of much raw courage. Sanford Proctor had known him from a long time back. They had joined the ranks of the New York City police together, and Proctor had been there when Harmon was told that the lead pipe that the mobster had used to work him over would leave him paralyzed from the waist down and necessitate a metal plate around the front of his brain, both for the rest of his life. That was in 1938, a long time ago. Both men were officially retired now, Proctor from the force and Harmon from the teaching career he had entered, but neither man really was retired. They spoke rarely about what they did, but Proctor knew that Harmon suspected he still worked now and then for various law enforcement agencies. And Proctor was sure that Harmon knew that he at the very least suspected . . .

Suspected what? Proctor smiled to himself, watching the eyes of his old friend, whose bull-like shoulders seemed to strain now with the taut emotions that had temporarily drained from his face. In the beginning, Proctor had suspected Harmon's unofficial, and therefore illegal, battle against crime. He had suspected the role Cam Sanchez had played for the past four years, had known that there had been two or three predecessors. These men supplied the brawn to complement Harmon's mental genius. They were men of action, his legs, his fighting machines. All that, Sanford Proctor suspected—no, he *knew*. But very unofficially, of course.

But as to Harmon's most recent activities, those beginning some seven or eight months ago . . .

This vampire business . . .

Twice Harmon had asked his assistance with some "small" problems, once here on Long Island regarding a Mafia-related hijacking, then in San Francisco regarding a witchcraft-drug cult. There had been mentions made of vampires in both instances. On the basis of that, when Proctor himself had been faced with the killer-bats' attack on the U.N., he had asked Harmon for help. It had come, but the exact details of the help were not known to Proctor. Then, subsequently . . .

His train of thought was broken off by his friend's voice.

"Interesting, this theory of Wesley Thurlow's. Strange that I should have missed reading about it."

"Not so strange. Not with you traveling about as much as you have been lately. Romania, Jamaica, Germany."

Professor Harmon's eyebrows raised almost to the widow's peak of silver leonine hair that crowned his head. "You've been keeping tabs on me, Sandy?"

Proctor shrugged. "What are old friends for?"

Harmon's eyes rested on those of the round man for a moment, then flickered back to the clips of paper on the desk. "The academic community hardly seemed to greet Dr. Thurlow's theory with enthusiasm, but I suppose that's on a par with normal behavior. Academicians, as a rule, are not overly imaginative, and when faced with a theory like this . . ."

He reached over to the desk for the copy of Wesley Thurlow's paper, looking now only at the title: *Was El Dorado Real?*

"Much too straightforward a title," Harmon commented. "Far better to have couched his thoughts under something like *Some Preliminary Indications That the Mythical City of Gold Had Some Historical Basis in Fact*."

Proctor agreed. "But, even then, one would have to show that the book of Sir Giles Stanby was more than merely the ravings of a madman or, say, a rather inventive writer."

Harmon nodded. "Aside from the murders and Cam's possibly being accused with regard to them, I'd very much like to see this book of Stanby's. Dr. Thurlow, for one, felt it held the key to the location of the hidden city of gold, even though he wrote here that it would take much additional study."

"As to that, you should consult your own bookshelves."

Harmon looked at his friend steadily. "My shelves?"

"I assume that was what she was referring to. Your young assistant. Miss Ktara. Before I left her tonight, she said—"

"That's ridiculous," Harmon interrupted. "I am fully aware of every single volume I own, and I am certain that I . . ."

"Damien? What is it?"

Harmon shook his head. "Perhaps I am mistaken," he said slowly. He was not about to reveal precisely what he was thinking. Once before he had found a book on his shelves that he was sure he had never seen before. That book, which seven months previously had begun their recent adventures which took him and Cam Sanchez to an underground crypt below a haunted European mountain, was called *The Runes of Ktara*. No, he could not be certain that the book titled

My Adventures in the Savage New Landes, authored by Sir Giles Stanby in the early eighteenth century was not on his shelves. But right now was not the time for him to investigate.

"Sandy, it is late. I thank you for all of your help tonight. I hope that all of this can be cleared up tomorrow."

Sanford Proctor took the hint and rose, swallowing the last dregs of cognac in his glass. "It would be something, wouldn't it, Damien, if in fact there was an El Dorado—a city of gold? It would be worth much, that knowledge. To some, it would be worth spilling a lot of blood."

Harmon said good night absently, Proctor's words turning over in his mind. His words, and Ktara's sudden interest in Cam's difficulty. If Stanby's book were in fact in this room, a book he knew he had not owned before, then it was obvious that she . . .

Gold. That conjured up a sinister image from his very recent past.

Gold. And blood.

Harmon was fifteen minutes into the brown leather-covered volume when the communicator on his desk signaled. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

The time was ten after five.

Precisely one hour and fifteen minutes earlier, there had been two uniformed policemen standing guard outside the door of the apartment in which Dr. and Mrs. Wesley Thurlow had lived. The bodies had been removed, all photographs having been taken long before. Inside, laboratory men still worked, methodically examining the entire place for any shred of

evidence that might lead other investigators closer to the identification of the murderers. The door separating hall from apartment was closed. That is, it was until one of the uniformed men opened it. The other policeman looked curious.

"Hey, Fred, why—"

But he stopped, his eyes suddenly coming into contact with another pair of eyes—these belonging to a large black cat that seemed to be waiting for the door to open so that it could enter the apartment. Their orders were clear. No one was to be allowed to enter unless an official badge were flashed first. Obviously, this animal did not qualify. Yet . . .

Fred had opened the door, he too seeming enchanted by the sleek, furred cat. As for himself, he again was about to tell Fred that it wasn't exactly right to . . .

But he didn't. Something in the back of his mind, something to do with the way the large yellow-green eyes looked at him, something . . .

The cat disappeared inside. Fred left the door ajar. Yes, that was the right thing to do. Yes—so that when the animal wanted to leave the place, it could do so. Yes.

Inside the apartment, none of the lab men seemed to notice the creature that sat on its haunches in the library, its eyes appearing to scan carefully, not so much the objects in the room, but something other than objects. Its ears stood up at point, as if there were words or thoughts to be heard—not the words and thoughts of those who at present occupied the apartment, but other thoughts, time-distant thoughts. The animal remained in the library but two or three minutes, then it rose on all fours and moved gracefully

to the door. As it passed the two uniformed men guarding the apartment from the outside, the one called Fred closed the door quietly. The other man looked at him with curiosity.

"Hey, Fred, why are you opening the door?"

Fred shook his head. "Opening the—" He scratched his jaw. "I—I guess I was doing that, all right, but I can't say."

The other man laughed. "I guess it's time for some coffee, that's what. We've been standing around here for too long without some."

Fred agreed to order some up. It was then that he noticed the large black cat at the other end of the hallway. "Hey, look at that there."

The other policeman looked. "Pretty-looking thing, isn't it?"

Two minutes later the door on the passenger side of the Cadillac opened. Cam now sat behind the wheel. "Well?"

The woman in black gave him a Lower East Side address. "Spin the wheels swiftly, Mr. Sanchez. We may be too late already."

The rain had begun again, although not like before, not as furious, not with the vengeance of the earlier hours. Tony Nelda held the collar of his windbreaker tightly to his throat as he began the long and arduous climb, the bottoms of his soles slipping slightly on the narrow staircase.

He swore to himself under his breath. Five floors to go. The climb was enough to qualify for an Olympic event all by itself. The former tenant of his apartment had been a seventy-year-old woman. No doubt she'd

solved the strain problem by keeping herself up there the whole time. Probably caused a series of heart failures among her sons and daughters who dutifully carried the bags of groceries up this torture trail. Tony Nelda was glad he himself was but twenty five, of strong heart and little bulk.

As for Maria . . .

Greenwich Village tease, that's what she was. Yes, she said, he could stay with her until the rain let up a bit, him taking this to mean that he'd be spending the entire night in her apartment. But then, when the rain let up, he suddenly found himself getting shoved through the doorway. "It's been nice, but you really must go." Such were her words of judgment.

"If it's been so nice, why must I go?" he countered. Not all that original, but serviceable. Keep them talking.

But she on her part insisted that a chance meeting at the New York Public Library could lead to nothing more than an exchange of thoughts and ideas—at least on the first night. If there were to be more times of getting together, and she really did hope there would be, in that the research he was involved in seemed to be so very interesting . . .

Interesting, crap! So *she* thought so! He, himself . . .

He looked at the three books he carried in the thin, see-through, protective plastic laundry bag. Two of them had come from the library. The third was that fool book of Thurlow's. A fool book owned by a fool professor and written by a fool Englishman who, if he were writing today, would be suspected of doing his penmanship under the influence of pot or LSD or something as wild or wilder. El Dorado. And a white

ruler of cannibalistic American Indians. Crap!

At the third landing he paused to catch his breath, then girded his innards for the next two flights. What the hell? If Thurlow wanted him to do a little research to back up the El Dorado theory, why not? Research was research, all of it boring anyway, so if this was his prof's pet idea and if he were able to give him something worthwhile, why, then the old professor might show his gratitude when grading time came around. The only trouble was that, so far at least, he hadn't been able to come up with very much. Old Sir Giles Stanby could be pretty windy in some of his descriptions, but when it came to his telling about where he had been—*precisely* where—you'd think he got his material from transcribing shorthand notes written by a drunk on stone tablets with a broken stylus.

Not bad. Not bad imagery at all. Have to remember that for use some other time, yes.

Fourth floor, one more to go. Already Tony Nelda was fumbling around in his trenchcoat pocket for his key, making sure he had the right one as he passed under the single-bulb light in the stairwell. The lower floors each had two lights, but the last leg of the trip was clothed in semidarkness, the one bulb set into a fixture that looked as if it were the original gaslight device. Probably the people hired to redo the place got exhausted before reaching this level, Tony Nelda thought. It was a thought that came to him whenever he made this climb at night, a thought that reminded him that he shouldn't lean too hard against the wooden banister to his right. It looked strong and heavy enough, but one never knew. In this place, the cockroaches were big enough to take out one of the up-rights with a single chomp. As for termites, he had no

idea if there were any, and he wasn't about to ask. When it came to insects, Tony Nelda felt that what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him—or at least it wouldn't keep him awake at night.

He did not like bugs, and the thought of them made him shiver, so much so that he halted in his climb. Somehow the notion occurred to him that behind his door—which he now could see in shadow at the top of the stairs—behind there was something lying in wait. A giant insect, a spider, perhaps . . .

Ridiculous. He was letting his imagination get the better of him again. It was one of his more serious faults. Such as imagining that the girl, Maria, had something else in mind other than simply talking to him. Such as imagining all sorts of things about that book by Giles Stanby. That black-dressed man he wrote about, for example; the white man who ruled the savages by terror. One almost could imagine, from Stanby's description, that the man was not really a *man* at all, but rather . . .

No. Not to think of that. The night was bad enough already. And one couldn't just stand here all night, not in a dizzying staircase just a few feet from one's own door. The door—

It was open. *Open!*

But—but it hadn't been.

And there! Something shiny. Like gold. Something that he couldn't see too clearly, something that now he couldn't quite take his eyes from.

"You are late, Tony Nelda," a voice—a soft, beckoning voice, a woman's—said to him. "We have been waiting a long time. Please join us, won't you?"

No—*no!* The word screamed inside his skull. He would not join them. Them? Yes, *she* said, "*We* have

been waiting.” But even as his right foot tried to descend, to move back off the step on which it rested and lower itself to the one below, a portion of his mind knew that the movement would not be completed, that that same right foot would move forward—forward and upward, closer to that seemingly disembodied disc of gold that shone with what was at one and the same time a searing heat and a freezing cold.

“Come in, please,” the woman said as his feet took him stumbling to the landing. “Ah—you have the book with you?”

The black Cadillac came to a screeching halt in the glistening deserted street.

“There!” Ktara said, pointing to a brownstone building across from them. “That is the one.”

Cam Sanchez already was out of his door and moving across the street at a run. His leaving the big car was a fluid motion that was delayed only an instant while he extracted from the Cadillac glove compartment an old friend, a .357 Magnum Smith and Wesson, a large gun he liked because it very effectively put very large holes in targets that rarely were in any condition to stand up for a second shot. He was almost at the opposite sidewalk when he stopped. He wasn’t sure whether the cry he heard came from Ktara’s throat or from her mental processes. But the startled sound—if *sound* it really was—carried more than the simple message of urgency. It told him where to look.

Up.

Shielding his eyes from the rain, he could see the man plainly. A young man standing on a thin window ledge, soiled and flimsy white curtains whipping around him from the open window to his rear. The way

his arms were poised, much like those of a novice diver on a high board, left little to the imagination as to what his intentions were. In a flash, Cam recognized that the window was on the building's fifth floor—and with that knowledge came the certainty that he was looking at one Tony Nelda, the young man Ktara had told him they had to reach quickly if they were to save him. Cam whirled around. "Ktara—stop him!"

But there was no need. Already she was attempting to do just that. The widened eyes told him so. No longer were they of the pale yellow-green color. Now their centers were bright with white fire. They were directed upward, their owner standing fully upright in the center of the quiet street.

Cam whipped his head around to determine her effectiveness.

The young man on the window ledge wavered, his arms trembling, his gaze no longer straight out but now down into the street—past Cam, directed to the point where Ktara stood. With a shudder, the young man began to reach backward with one hand, to gain some kind of purchase on the edge of the window frame behind him.

Then the tops of his shoulders suddenly jerked up, the upper half of his body lurched forward—and the young man's eyes opened wide. There was the beginning of a scream, but only the beginning. It choked off before it started, and as the upright young man turned slightly around on the window ledge the cause was obvious to Cam. Even in the foggy haze of the early morning, the silver hilt of the knife glinted from between the man's shoulder blades.

He twisted back, as if his body were fighting once more to retain its equilibrium. Then his knees buckled.

Then he pitched outward and downward into the street five stories below.

Cam thumbed the hammer of the Magnum and moved swiftly to the door of the building. It was locked—but only for the instant it took him to rear back his right bootsole and smash it splinteringly just above the door handle. In four strides he was at the bottom of the stairwell, then rapid footfalls pushed him upward. One floor, then the second, then . . .

At the third landing something went by his ear, something that sang like a bee or a fast-traveling hummingbird. The glint of silverlike steel told him what the object was even before it smacked into the wall behind him. The knife-thrower obviously had a blade or two in reserve.

Fine, let him try throwing while ducking, Cam thought to himself as his feet stopped and his arms swung upward. The big gun roared out twice in the direction of the fleeing black shadow above. Then the feet began pounding again, pistol cocked for the rapid-fire shot that might very soon be needed.

Fourth landing gained. Cam stopped again, eyes and weapon alert. Nothing. Not a sound. Then . . .

Two things at once. A cold blast of air hitting him in the face. The sound of feet on metal.

The fire escape! There had to be one up there somewhere. And his quarry was using it right now!

He took the final flight of stairs four or five steps to the single bound. Even before he reached the top, he saw the open doorway. Tony Nelda's room, no doubt—but his killers weren't in there. No, they would have gone . . .

To the right—yes! Another open window, this one not at all empty. A big man, bigger than Cam. A big

man with a coolly aimed pistol that was casually awaiting the appearance of a target.

Cam dove to the floor just as the gun spoke. His own weapon fired in reply, but the aim was too fast. Wood splinters erupted from the window frame. By the time the Magnum was adjusted for another try, the target was gone.

"Damn it!" roared Cam, jumping to his feet and pounding his way to the window. A quick but careful look told him his man hadn't gone down the steel ladder. Another swift look told him that no one was on the upper portion of the fire escape. The big man had been fast, very fast, even though the short distance to the roof wasn't much to cover.

All right, swift man, here comes company!

His pistol cocked once again, Cam swung out onto the steel, moving one-handed like a lithe jungle animal up the vertical stepway. The first portion of his body to break the roofline was his right hand, the one filled with copper-jacketed death. Then his head and eyes.

The rooftop looked like any rooftop, except that on this one there was a woman running across and crossing to the roof of the next building. Also, there was a small, thin man running with her. But a third item captured Cam's attention more than the others, no doubt because it was much closer:

A size thirteen shoe was coming toward him like gangbusters.

"You die now, si?" came the lyrics accompanying the move.

Cam's reply was nonvocal. Under the circumstances, the important thing was not to trade witty sayings, but to get his brains out of the way as fast as possible. That he did, mistakenly so—because the foot

in question was not directed at the space between his ears. The foot connected, neatly. And Cam's Magnum exploded—harmlessly upward—an instant before it tore loose from his grip. The sound that immediately followed told Cam that a hasty retreat would be the better part of valor.

The sound was the *click* of the gun's hammer.

No sooner had his left hand released the steel bar it had been clutching, than the big man's weapon fired. Cam's right hand shot to the nearest bar as his body plummeted downward, the resulting stopping of motion causing a strain-ripping sensation to fire through his shoulder. But he had accomplished what he'd intended. He was now some five feet below the top of the roof. As for just what he should do now . . .

But his mind hardly had time to consider the alternatives. For, suddenly, the night was no longer night. Everything around him was bathed in a bright yellow light—a mechanical light. And the voice he heard—that, too, was mechanical.

Detective Lieutenant Hank Navarre was speaking through a bullhorn:

“Okay, Sanchez. You stay right there until we say it's all right with us to come down. Move—move just an inch—and your closest kin won't have enough of you left for identification!”

It's all right. Come down, Mr. Sanchez, but do hurry—please!

There was, of course, the urgency in Ktara's mind-message. Still, however, Cam did not feel all that confident as he tentatively lowered his left foot. But the sound of a ripping machine gun that he'd expected didn't come. Nothing came. Just the silence of the night

tempered by the blood pulsating through the veins behind his ears.

She was waiting for him when his bootsoles touched concrete.

"The car—quickly. I cannot hold them forever!"

As he followed her, straying only long enough to retrieve the Magnum, he noticed the strange scene around him. Others too—people awakened by the shots and the bright lights of the four squad cars that had stopped at awkward angles in the middle of the street—looked in awe at the some half dozen or more men, men with drawn guns, men with looks of determination, men who stood frozen in their poses.

"He kept his promise to you," Ktara said as he got into the black Cadillac. She sat behind the wheel. "You haven't been out of his sight since you left the precinct house." She started the big engine.

"You might have told me," Cam said.

She looked at him for only a moment. "You should have a better idea of police procedure than I. How do I operate that thing? How do I contact Professor Harmon?"

She was referring to the electronic equipment under the dash. This vehicle, like the station wagon that was the second vehicle Harmon owned, was fully appointed. They were electronic marvels, all of the equipment in them developed by Cam, who, studying on his own from the books in Harmon's library, had turned out to be a genius when it came to electronic communication.

When the car spurted forward, he leaned down and pushed two buttons. "Wait until he responds. He's probably asleep."

"Would you like to wager?" she asked. The question

was real, as would the resultant wager be if Cam chose to accept it. Harmon's was one mind she could not get to, because of that steel plate he wore in the front of his brain. But she knew him well, as evidenced by the fact that there was but one small *beep* of the unit before the man at the Westhampton end of the hookup acknowledged the call.

"Harmon," he said simply.

"Professor," the woman said. "You have read the book?"

"Some of it, yes."

"You recognize of whom Sir Giles was writing?"

Harmon's voice was dry. "Under the circumstances, how could I miss?"

"Very well. I suggest you make preparations for all of us to depart this city as soon as possible. You must understand that the police connect Mr. Sanchez with yet another death. We will explain when we see you. The important thing is that, in the time I had within the room of the young man who most recently has died, I have learned that they have the key to the whereabouts of Kabaya's people. With the book plus the woman's personal knowledge plus the Disc of Osce—Osce means water—they can and will retrace Stanby's steps to reach Kabaya. Unless they are stopped. You will tell the Master that."

Harmon's voice came to Cam's ears like the cold steel he'd so recently grasped:

"I *will* tell your Master?"

"Please, Professor—you must! Unless—unless you wish your associate to be found guilty of murder!"

A pause. "I assume you mean Mr. Sanchez."

"Your assumption is correct," she replied.

Another pause. "Cam, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Professor."

"And what do you say about all this?"

Cam took his eyes from the speaker just long enough to see that Ktara was heading the Cadillac onto the East River Drive. "With all due respect, Professor, the lady has said it all. I don't understand all that much of it, but she obviously does."

"You're saying I should—"

"Yes," Cam completed, his eyes catching the yellow-green of Ktara's. "Tell the Master. *Her* Master," he corrected himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Daylight. It would be daylight soon. In a couple of hours. Damien Harmon thought that thought to himself as he pressed the button that would open the door of the special elevator Cam had designed for the Westhampton manor. Daylight—and with it freedom from fear.

But Ktara had been insistent.

Ktara. A mystery unto herself. A beautiful mystery that had been alive when the European caveman had looked for other mysteries in the blaze of his nocturnal fire. Ktara, a woman eternally young—as long as her master remained alive. A woman whose motives were difficult to discern. Whim—that was the motive Cam

attributed to her. Simply whim. Although Harmon knew that Cam wished there were some other motive, perhaps attraction to himself. As for Harmon, he too hoped that there was a motive within Ktara other than her own amusement. Somehow he *knew* there was, but its precise definition eluded him as it did Cam. Neither man probably ever would know her true feelings for them—if there were in fact real feelings she harbored for either. It was a certainty that neither would ever tame her. No, she belonged to the one she served.

Him.

He realized the panel door on the lift had opened silently. He wheeled himself inside and pressed the bottom one of the four buttons on the control panel. The ride was short. When the door opened automatically, he pushed the lever that kept the panel open. There was no sense in blocking the exit, not now when the rules of the game had changed. The six months were up, and the professor was no longer automatically in command. He still had his ultimate weapon, yes—a weapon that had been put to the test more than once. But the rules were different now . . .

A low-set wall switch to the right of the elevator controlled the lighting in the basement. Harmon thumbed it. Bright fluorescents blazed, illuminating the bone whiteness of the walls of the large room. Lined with workbenches and shelves containing a wide range of chemical and electronic equipment, this cold white room that lay beneath the three main floors of the great house was an uncomfortable room that no amount of light and white paint could make comfortable. It was not the dampness of the place and not the implements that lined the walls. There was no doubt about what it was.

The thing in the center of the room, the thing in the center of the floor.

The overlarge wood and metal thing with fierce, demonic gargoyles decorating the corners.

The casket.

Harmon stared at it, then briefly closed his eyes. Internally, the telekinetic movement he had mastered tripped the lever of the small solenoid implant under his ribcage. This caused a reaction in a second unit, which Harmon could visualize directly under the heart of the being that now lay within the heavy casket. Harmon opened his eyes and waited. The tiny wooden sliver, which had been carved from a long and bloody stake, now had been removed from the heart of the one whose name meant Son of the Dragon, the sliver now being received by the metal shell no larger than a walnut. At any moment . . .

The lid of the casket opened. Then . . .

He stood, taller than Cam Sanchez, his shoulders wider. Immaculately dressed in black evening wear complete with red-lined cape, he stood proudly, his bearing noble. The royal look was all about him—in the high forehead, in the aquiline nose, in the smooth black hair combed back straight from the low widow's peak so that not a hair was out of place, in the liquid, dark red eyes that peered out at the man in the wheelchair.

A powerful man. But Harmon had seen this individual when he had ten times the power he now possessed—when, at his will, the teeth, which even now were long, turned into what could only be described as fangs, when the great nose flattened and the lips pulled back into an animal leer, when the now-docile widow's peak lowered to meet dark, unruly brows . . .

But now the brows were arched. He was obviously amused. The lilting tone of his heavily accented voice showed amusement as well.

"You have chosen *now*, Professor Harmon? You have selected this time as your moment of death?"

Harmon smiled. "Don't make a move forward—Count Dracula!"

The count's lips curled. "You have come alone, Professor. That is unusual. Normally, your young friend Sanchez and my companion are with you."

"They are not within the house," Harmon said simply.

A pause. "You have chosen this time, then, for our—how do you Americans say it? Showdown. Yes, showdown. A colorful word."

"Only in Western films, Count. However, my reply is no. No showdown. The time has not yet come for that—unless you so choose."

Dracula laughed. "And *if* I so choose?"

Harmon's voice was level. "You are finished within three hours. The morning sun will find your immobile body under its rays out upon the beach."

Dracula took a step toward the wheelchair. "You dare—"

"Hold it—right there." Something in the way the professor said it made the count stop. "That's better. If it were my intention to finish you, I did not have to bring you to an awakened state. Far simpler to destroy a sleeping Dracula—would you not agree?"

A smile. "Then this is not to be our final battle?"

"Again, not unless you choose it to be."

Another pause. Then a self-assured laugh from the count. "I suppose, Harmon, that you have another little job you would like me to accomplish. Another ex-

pression of your vengeance against those whom you think to be evil. As I have had cause to mention to you previously, your notion of evil is meaningless. Be honest with yourself, Harmon. Evil people, as defined by you, are merely those people against whom you have some grudge."

"I am not in the mood for your philosophy, Count."

"Really? Then I fail to see why you disturb my slumber, unless—"

"Kabaya," Harmon said. "The Disc of Osce."

A bit of the amused look left the count's face. "Ktara has told you of these matters?"

Harmon smiled. "She has told me only that I am to tell you that someone knows the whereabouts of Kabaya's people, that this same someone possesses the Disc of Osce, and that this person is now in a position to trace Sir Giles Stanby's steps."

"Who—"

"The someone has not been identified to me. But you look a bit worried, Count. I think I know why."

"You think—"

"Gold. Sir Giles' book speaks much of gold—gold in a land that has not been discovered yet by modern civilization. Yes, it would have to be the gold, wouldn't it? Not all that long ago we determined, you and I, the need you had for gold, the caches of the precious metal that you have around the globe, the lengths you will go to be sure it is secure."

The face of the count turned dark. "I will not speak of this with such a one as yourself."

"No need to. Ktara's *Runes* says most of it. The gold hoards are being saved for *the next time*. Her verses are not explicit as to what that phrase means, but I have my own thoughts about that. A golden weapon to defeat

some thing or things when next it comes or they come—perhaps the Old Gods of whom, earlier in the *Runes*, she—”

“I will *not* speak of that!”

“And of Kabaya—will you speak of him?”

Dracula looked for a moment into Harmon’s eyes. “You know,” he said simply.

“I have read Sir Giles’ words. And with the information Ktara has given me—”

The count waved his hand. “It was bound to happen. Yes, even back then I knew that one day . . . but—*but* the one who has the Disc must be stopped!”

“Yes,” Harmon said quietly.

The count’s right eyebrow rose. “You—you have your own reason? Yes. You have a personal reason, I am certain of it.”

Harmon considered. Ktara most certainly would communicate everything to the one whom she called Master. “Yes. Cam Sanchez. There have been killings. There are some of authority who believe he is responsible.”

Count Dracula laughed. “Fate, Harmon. Do you think often of fate? If not, you should. After all these months, once again your desires are intertwined with my own. For a while you and I must maintain our elusive truce, so that both of us may gain our ends. So be it, Harmon. I care not for your man Sanchez—let him be boiled alive for the amusement of the masses, for all I care. You, on your part, could not care less regarding the protection of the treasures I have managed to amass during the years of my sojourn on this world. And yet—yet—you and I must once again join forces. Fate, Harmon?”

The professor ignored the question. “You used the

word *truce*. Do we have one—until the conclusion of this business?”

Dracula's eyeteeth seemed to lengthen almost imperceptibly.

“Truce, Harmon? *Truce*? You flatter yourself. You know—deep within yourself you know—that one day you will feel the sharp tips of my teeth slice into your throat. You know you cannot hold out against me in the long run. You *know*—”

His speech stopped. His hands grasped his breast, just over his heart. There was a sharp cry.

Then he dropped to the floor.

The telekinetic movement of the splinter back into Dracula's heart completed, Professor Harmon opened his eyes. They focused on the inert being by the side of the hideous casket. His smile was not one of humor. It was more of a grimace.

“I *know*, Count,” he said, almost in a whisper. “I know that this round is mine. I accept my win with humility. How will you accept yours—if you gain it?”

But the count was in no condition to respond. Only the surf, crashing in the night outside, made any reply at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

From the book *My Adventures in the Savage New Landes* by Sir Giles Stanby, being "recollections of wilde oddities and dangerous moments during the years 1680 through 1684":

. . . and many were the hands which went down to the sea bottom that cruel night, hands which had braved many a storm boldly. But this storm was among the very worst which the pagan King Neptune had in his arsenal for Christian men who dared to invade his uncharted seas. From the beginning of it, from the blowing and the buffeting the old ship received, from the al-

most immediate loss overboard of the instruments which might have helped to guide us from the cascading walls of sea water which poured upon us with increasing furor, this was a storm whose fury had no equal in my memory. "The Captain thinks we're all to die," Trotman confided to me, and I to him confided in return that I in truth thought the same. To which Trotman replied that we should prepare ourselves for our fate, by which I assume he meant we should earnestly pray for our salvation.

This, however, can only be assumption, as at that moment our fate, as he had termed it, descended upon us with sudden ferocity and irreversible effect. The crashing and renting of wood thundered within my ears and then was replaced by the increased roar of the sea itself. It was only after several attempts to regain my footing that I realized there no longer was a decking beneath my boots, but rather the black depths of cold sea. And then something struck my shoulder, something hard to which I turned to cling. I heard the shouts of other men and felt hands upon me, pulling me through the green-white spray. It seemed as if I were being hauled onto or into something solid, then my mind refused to function any longer and I entered a black swoon.

It was with a scorched throat and sand-dry tongue that I awoke unto the world. The sun was high in the sky and beating down with a mercy very much like that which the sea had shown us the night before when it claimed Trotman. No, it had been two nights previous that our vessel had gone under, I was informed by Streeter. Two nights, he said, hardly able to speak. None of us, none of the eleven souls who numbered the survivors able to gain the slightly hollowed portion of

the hull of *The Marie Gray* which was our raft, none of us was in a condition fit to attend his own funeral. Well, perhaps that, but no more than that.

We drifted that day in calm sea, continuing through the night as well. Toward morning Clifford died, screaming of thirst and hunger, but not solely from those causes; his chest had been crushed before he had pitched from the *Marie's* decks, and the pain within him must have been intolerable. As his body sank beneath the waves, there were those among us who considered him the fortunate one, him and the others who had died even more quickly that first night. The urge to live was waning within us, on a parallel course with the waning of the essence of life itself.

On the fourth day Engelwythe died, just rolling over onto his face and lying there, his dry-white tongue extended. As he too joined his recently dead mates under the waves, I suddenly felt the wind upon my face. Cool it was, and refreshing. I was about to call this to the attention of the others when something hot and fiery exploded to the rear of my eyes. This, then, is death? I asked myself that, but no one replied. Not even Death himself, because I was not yet dead. I merely had fainted again.

How long I spent in the Valley of Shades, I do not know, for when I awoke there was no one else aboard our raft who could tell me. We still were nine, but I could not determine how many of the others were in a swoon as I had been or how many of them were in the state from which there is no awakening this side of the Curtain. And, even as I tried to move to make such a determination, again the blackness closed in upon me. When next I awakened there was something wet touching my lips. Water, *clear water*, from some fashion of

cup. And moving the palms of my hands under me, I could feel sand—*land!* I tried to open my eyes but could not, not completely, due to the lids being burned severely. I could see the shapes of them who stood around me, hear their voices. They spoke not English, these people, and unless I was dreaming, unless I had gone truly mad, I recognized that at least one of the voices I heard was that of a woman. No longer able to fight to keep awake, I again slept.

Again, I can speak nothing of the time which passed until next I awakened fully. In the interim period I can recall water and morsels of food being placed between my lips. I also remember knowing that I was sick with fever, a fever which I still retained when my senses partially were restored to me. I lay on my back in a vessel constructed entirely of lashed reeds. It was of ample size to hold myself and six other beings. As I looked at the six, I saw that I was the only one of those who had survived the death of *The Marie Gray* aboard. The six were brown savages, long of hair and fierce of face. I sat up abruptly, to see if there was another craft on the water, another similar to the one in which I rode. There was none. I saw, however, that we were moving rapidly, through the medium of five swift paddles, upstream against the current of what looked to be a wide river. Vegetation of the tropical sort overgrew both banks as far as the eye could see in either direction. I tried to speak. A croaking sound was all that I could utter. But through repeated hand-signals I made my meaning clear to the one of them who held no paddle.

This one was a woman, the only woman among them. Realizing as I write this now that I have just written that all of the brown savages were “long of hair and

fierce of face," I truly cannot reword that sentence. Yes, she was fierce, this lone woman in the boat. She also had an animal beauty about her. Not a *human* beauty, to be sure, not a *civilized* beauty, for she was a barbarian, a savage. But cannot we humans recognize the sleek beauty of the racing dog, or that of a well-breeded horse? It is in this sense, then, that I use the word beauty, a beauty which fully encompassed the ferocity of her features.

Nonetheless, I trust my readers of the more gentle sex will understand when I say that I found this woman, *girl* really, attractive. She was very attentive and very kind as well as soft-spoken. It did not take her long to make me understand that all of my companions were dead. All of them. I had seen Clifford and Englewythe expire. But now I had to come to mental grips with the fact that Streeter, Browne, Hegsmuth, Hutter, Renge, Collwell, Verstrom and Grale, that they had passed from this life while I—I—survived! Not that I knew all of them well. I did not, but no one takes sail with another man and knows nothing of him. Streeter, especially, I would have called my friend, and perhaps Hutter as well. The others—well, what did it matter? All were dead. All except myself. And, since I was alive and breathing, it was imperative I know what was happening to me, where I was and to where it was I was being transported.

My girl companion was of little assistance in helping me locate myself. All she could communicate to me regarding my whereabouts was fairly much as I had deduced already. They had found us on the shore. They were bringing the sole survivor up river. It was when I asked *why* up river, that I got a curious response. She pointed to my face, then to my hands,

then to my naked feet. I gestured to her, asking if that was where her home was.

(The gestures, for those interested in how sign language is improvised by novices such as myself, included my pointing repeatedly at her and the men who propelled us up river with their paddles and my closing my eyes and tilting my head over onto its side so that I appeared to be sleeping on my hands, then mocking the states of awakening, eating and sleeping again. Such are the gestures by which I conveyed the notion of *home*. The astute reader no doubt will think this an overlong method, and perhaps he is right. However, I challenge him to determine a shorter version, if he will first take on the proper amount of feverishness my brain still retained at the time of which I speak!)

In any event, I communicated my point, and she communicated hers. No, we were not going to the place in which she and her companions lived.

Where, then? That was what I next tried to determine. But I failed to do so, even though I was sure my question was understood. All I received in reply was her constant touching of my face, my hands and my feet. Also she touched these places on her own body. I did not understand, not then. But later I was to do so. Later, but only too soon.

We continued up the river, my male companions saying little to one another as they applied themselves steadily at the paddles. They were fine specimens of physical musculature, these men, although but two of them looked to be younger than my own twenty and six years. Even with all their physical attributes, propelling our river vehicle was not an easy task, not at the steady pace they kept up, even though they spelled each other

for a time when the current of the river slackened a bit. Of food and drink they partook little, as did the woman, who in turn insisted that I stuff myself with as much of their viands as was possible. The solid food was of two types, a brown ground-up meal which I assumed was composed of a type of corn and a thick hard-to-chew dried meat. Both of these were tasteless, but this certainly was not the case of the strange broth which was forced upon me. Perhaps it was meant to be served warmer than it was, but nonetheless I suspect it would have smelled and tasted as foul no matter what the temperature of its serving. In consistency it was thin to lumpy. In color it was a pale bilious green. In one word, it was terrible. And yet either that or one of the two solids I consumed had a beneficial medicinal effect upon me. My fever seemed to be lessening with each hour. This I noticed mostly during the night, in that the days were so hot as to induce a fever of their own from the outside of my skin right through my entire system.

Now and again, when we would come upon what looked to be a special clearing, the long boat would be directed aground for a space of time. By watching the men, and for that matter the woman as well, I had no doubt as to the reason for these regular stops. Although at first I had little inclination to regulate my personal waste removal system to such precise timing, I did my earnest best to perform effectively. There was, after all, no real assurance as to how long we would travel before we reached our next port.

My fever at a low ebb, I still found it necessary to sleep for long and frequent periods. Just how long were these excursions into the land of misty sea dreams I cannot say, which is why I have no firm idea as to the

number of days I was aboard that craft which ever and ever seemed to be wending its way to the western edge of the world, where no doubt this river had its source. The direction, of course, was easy to determine. One had only to watch the sun, as it moved in the air spaces above, those left by the steaming green jungle growth which still encroached on the very edges of the waterway themselves. And although the directions shifted now and again, the steady direction always corrected itself to the west, perhaps west southwest would be more precise.

But direction was one matter, time quite another. I could not measure the passing of days and nights; how did I know whether or not I fell asleep during the dark hours and spent the entire daylight hours in that state only to awaken the following night? Hunger and thirst were no clock-like devices for me, since each time my eyes opened a rude cup or spoon or a strip of that dried meat would be shoved into my mouth with the admonition that I was to either chew or swallow or both. Even the growth of what was by now getting to be a most fulsome (and, I might add, insect infested) beard was no indicator. Never having grown such an ornament before, I was in no position to gauge its rate of growth at the present time.

In short, I knew neither where I was being taken nor how long it was taking to take me there. Perhaps you, gentle reader, will feel that I was in an impossible position. Perhaps. But remember you this: I, Giles Stanby, was alive. No other member of the men who sailed *The Marie Gray*, to my knowledge then and to my knowledge now, could say the same.

Still, there was a strangeness in the way that the men who propelled me to my destination studiously avoided

looking at me. Their eyes were everywhere but upon my person. On the chance occasion when I happened to turn suddenly and catch one of them looking in my direction, his eyes shifted with a rapidity which might have been expected if I had just lashed the fellow with a stout whip. Very strange, I thought to myself, considering that they had saved my life and obviously were bringing me to some place where I could be cared for. But stranger still was the way the girl looked at me. She, only she, *looked* at me, and she did so in a way that communicated to me that I was some kind of miracle. My face, my hands, my unshod feet, my eyes.

I was, of course, aware that these savages in this part of the world, or at least many of them, never had laid eyes upon a white man, and I had heard the stories of those first contacts when the dwellers of the forest revered the men of white skin as being some kind of gods. But the look in her eyes was different. She *knew* what I was. Not that I was an Englishman loyal to a Crown halfway around the world; no, not that. She had her mind made up as to my identity. The difficulty was that I did not know what it was *she* knew, and all my skill at wordless communication did me absolutely no good at all. Whatever or whoever it was that I was supposed to be, I was worthy of her attention, just as I seemed to be worthy of the intense fear which the male savages exhibited toward me. Even the girl, though she fed me and looked after me with extreme tenderness, somewhere behind her eyes, she viewed me as something more than a man, something to be feared. I was to understand why very soon now, as it turned out, and since the interim narrative would have little of interest to those not keenly desirous to know of my sleeping, eating and eliminating habits, I will move quickly to

that part of my story.

It was night when it happened. I was asleep when I was rudely awakened, this time not by the girl but by one of the men, one of the younger ones. The craft in which I had spent several days was beached. There was a clearing. My first thought was that we had stopped for the usual thing, but it became apparent to me that this was not the case. All of the men and the girl as well remained seated. I understood at once. I alone was to depart the boat. I alone was to step into the clearing.

I looked to the girl for some kind of confirmation of this, but now it was she who refused to return my glance, whereas the men aboard glared at me as if in hatred. There was a flash of something bright, and my mind was well enough by now to recognize the shape of a knifeblade when my eyes perceived it. The weapon was in the hand of one of the men, and I harbored no doubt that he would use the thing. I had no choice. I stood and stepped from the craft.

Immediately a brown foot pushed the boat from the land and the reed vessel moved out to drift back toward where it had come. I had been delivered, that was plain to me. But delivered to whom, or to what? I was mulling that large question over in my mind when I saw the stone. It was a rock, really, a large rock which seemed to be curiously carved. It could not have been natural, yet it looked so. But carved or natural, it was of a frightening shape.

It was shaped as a huge human skull.

Complete with leering lower jaw and deep-set black haunting eyes, it was the Head of Death!

Was *this* why I had been brought here? For Death to claim me now, after I successfully had avoided His dark clutches?

These were my thoughts when suddenly, from the boat in the river, the girl cried out. There were answering cries from the men, but to no avail as, suddenly, the girl no longer was in the boat but over the side, swimming directly toward me! There was a collective moan from the reed vessel, but it did not stop its eastward motion. No, it continued on its course, and by the time the girl stepped onto the earth of my clearing, there were neither men nor boat to see. But this girl and I were not the only ones within that clearing. As if by magic there was another person. No, there were several persons. All but one of them were as brown as the girl who had decided to join me. All of them, the brown barbarians, held sharp spears aimed in such a way as to pierce my entrails most effectively. The one who held no spear, the one who was not brown but who was as white as my own skin would have been had it not been reddened by the rays of the sun, *she* looked at me with eyes which looked to be the color of yellow or green or both.

"You are in a most difficult position," she said to me. In *English*, she said it, although it seemed that my tongue was not one she was used to speaking. "It is through no fault of your own that you are here, but you are here. Speak not. Utter not a word, Giles Stanby. Else I may not be able to save your life."

Utter not a word, Giles Stanby! Far more than worrying about my continued existence, this was the thing which seared my very mind. How, *how*, did this blackhaired woman of white skin; *how could she know my name?*"

I am dreaming, I told myself. I told myself that over and over again as at spearpoint the brown girl and

myself were directed through a cleared pathway which was to lead us to the Lord knew what. The white woman, who was dark black of hair and wore black clothing, led the way. At times she spoke to me, although I am not certain that she used words to speak. Dear reader, recall that I perhaps was not completely well, that perhaps my mind was not as clear as it is now or as it was before that dreaded storm which produced myself as its lone survivor. Recall that, then sift through with me the memories of which I speak.

In any event, she spoke to me, saying such things as: "When the Master comes to you, bow low in deference." And "If your lust is gold, show not that lust. Gold is nothing when contrasted with life, *your* life!" But I had as yet seen no gold, or any Master either, for that matter. But I was to do both; indeed I was, and very shortly.

First, the gold. The clearing we entered was full of it. It was a kind of town, a village, I suppose. All around me was gold. The people, men and women, wore it in ornament, more richly than the paintings, which have come down to us from Ancient Egypt. But what fascinated me was the children. They *played* with the precious metal. Their toys were fashioned from the yellow brilliance of the heavenly stuff! These things I saw not all at once, not the details which I set forth here, but even though I rush the details on this page before me I cannot but do so. Imagine, reader: gold, gold, gold, gold. *Everywhere gold!* If you can imagine that, then you have the correct impression of the brilliance and richness which formed a thunderous onslaught against my eyes and mind. *Gold!*

But the Master. Yes. I was led to a great pyramidal structure. Not the smooth-faced kind of erection which

the Nile people constructed. This was a stepped structure with a flattened top. And at the top of the edifice stood the mightiest looking human I had ever lain eyes upon. Bedecked with gold, was he. Gold around his waist and neck, gold around his head, which seemed to spew great feathers of some prehistoric bird, feathers which were fashioned from finely honed gold. His eyes, dark and non-communicative, looked down upon me. He said nothing. But those who had guided me, all except the white woman, fell to their knees and cried out what I later was to know was this man's name.

"Kabaya! Kabaya! *Kabaya!*"

Three times they shouted the name, after which there was a deadly silence. The man whose name was Kabaya spoke to the woman of the white skin, not in English, but somehow, *somehow*, I seemed to understand his meaning.

"This man of the beard. He is white of skin as is the Master, as is yourself. He is one with you?"

"He is under my protection," the woman replied.

"If he is not one with you, if he is an uninvited guest, he must die. Such is the charge which your Master has given me."

The woman's eyes flashed, "I have told you. He is under my protection. As is the woman from the coast who is with him. Do you, Kabaya, challenge this protection I give them?"

There was then a long period of silence. No, perhaps it was not long. I say now, however, that it seemed to me to be exceedingly long. These two, the great brown giant and the white woman with the strange commanding eyes, they stared at each other for a time which may have been comprised of moments or hours, I cannot tell which, and then contact was broken. I

sighed with what I suppose was unwarranted relief when I saw that it was the man upon the plateau of the pyramid who first broke contact. Still, his tone was as one who commanded.

"*He* shall decide in this matter," the man said. Kabaya.

The woman seemed to bow. "He, Kabaya, *always* decides. It would be best for you always to remember that."

Orders were then given, orders from the one named Kabaya, orders which suddenly I could not understand. But I could understand that rough hands had grasped my arms and shoulders and were propelling me and the girl, the brown girl whose eyes now looked terrified, toward a building of lashed wood. Yet, even though I should have been frightened, or at the very least should have been thinking about how I could effect an escape, I seemed to hear words within my mind. "Do not act rashly. Although fear is justified, although fear for your very life is justified, do nothing rash. I will attempt to help you." And I knew somehow that, even though I could not see the black-haired white woman, that it was she who was telling me these things. Amazing, yes. So much so that I cannot blame the reader who envisions that my narrative is based upon little more than the effects of a terrible fever which I thought I had lost. If that is your reaction, dear reader, let it be so. But I ask that you bear with me, for there is even more fever-inspired fantasy to come, if indeed it was fever-inspired.

We sat, Pala and I (Pala was her name; she communicated that much to me that night, my lovely brown girl), within the rude hut to which we had been led. There were no bindings upon our limbs, but we

both understood that to venture forth from the enclosure would mean certain and swift death. There were then tender touches between Pala and myself for a time, a time which ended when the quiet of the night suddenly was broken by the sound of drums. All around us they sounded, these drums, and as I looked out the entrance-way of the hut I could see that now the fires which were at various points within the village had been built up so that they blazed wildly. Especially was this so with the fire which grew to tremendous heights just before the great step pyramid in the village center.

As I was viewing this I quickly had to step back to allow another person to enter the hut. She was a young girl, younger than Pala, and quite pretty. She was entirely naked, except for a golden disc she wore about her neck from a chain of the same metal. The disc was dazzlingly beautiful, but I was even more taken aback by the girl herself, by her manner. For as soon as she had entered, she lowered herself to both her knees and looked deeply into my eyes. By her demeanor, I received the certain impression that she was offering herself to me. But the offering itself was strange, for her eyes showed a combination of fear and honor which was difficult to fathom. Also difficult to fathom was precisely what I was expected to do. I looked to Pala for some sort of explanation, but her eyes remained upon the other girl, eyes which were filled with fury and hatred. When my own eyes returned to the newcomer I was confused still more, in that her posture had changed. She still knelt, but her upper body was now straight, with her head arched backward and the underside of her throat thrust out toward me. Not her breasts, but her *throat*. And then I noticed the mark-

ings upon that part of her body. Small red circles, two of them. I took a step forward to examine these more closely when yet another person entered the hut.

It was the giant called Kabaya. He shouted something at the kneeling girl, tearing from her throat the golden disc. Even before that action she had jumped to her feet as if lightning had stricken her, this from the force of his words. I could not understand all of it, but the word *Dracu*, that word I distinctly heard three times. When she had run from the hut, the savage turned upon me with an animal snarl. A golden dagger flashed in his hand. The drum beat from outside suddenly was dimmed within my brain, my own blood pounding more loudly as I feebly raised my hands in an attempt to defend my life.

But then there was a new sound within the room, a kind of *hissing* sound. Kabaya's knife froze in its motion as he looked down at the floor to the right of where I stood. I followed his gaze and was surprised to see a large black cat. Not one of the larger jungle species, no. It appeared to be your ordinary cat that you might see in London or any civilized city, except that it was perhaps of sleeker fur and somewhat larger than usual. And its eyes, those too were unusual as even now it seemed to stare into those of Kabaya.

And then the giant savage began to speak through clenched teeth as it were, coldly and levelly. He seemed to be speaking to the animal! There came, of course, no reply from the black feline, none that I could hear, certainly, but strangely the man called Kabaya acted indeed as if he had received some sort of reply. Very strange! But stranger still was the expression on his face when *He* spoke.

He. I capitalize the pronoun, knowing full well that

the practice usually is reserved for use when referring to the Deity. Yet the one who now stood at the threshold of the rude hut, while perhaps no god, was much more than man, something more than human, I am convinced of it! His hair was black, combed back straight and as smooth as the fur of the cat which remained at my side. He was robed entirely in black, flawlessly so, his huge frame, taller and broader at the shoulders even than Kabaya, forming a towering presence as he looked down upon us from where he stood. He was white of skin, but a whiteness which was exceedingly pale. Everything about him suggested European nobility, from the finely curved nose to the arched eyebrows, in short, his total imperious presence. All except for the richly deep redness of his lips and the centers of his eyes. "*Dracu!*" Kabaya whispered.

No word passed between them, but even I could understand the passing of the command. The white nobleman, who surely was Dracu the Master, stepped into the hut and off to one side to allow Kabaya to exit. The large savage did so, with movements which I assumed were calculated to regain a measure of dignity, in which he was only partially successful. His golden knife and the disc and chain remained on the earth floor where he had dropped them.

There were then only the three of us, in addition to the black cat. The Master spoke, his words accented richly as had been those of the black-haired white woman earlier this night, accents which suggested to me that, regardless of their familiarity with the English tongue, they had not been in the practice of using it for many, many years. The tone of his voice was unsettling, but even more so were his words themselves:

"You are fortunate to be alive, Giles Stanby. You

have escaped the cold clutches of death several times in your recent days, this I know. It would be indeed a pity for you to meet your death here in this place, but that will happen, Giles Stanby, unless you prepare to make your departure at once."

Somehow I found the words to reply: "But my coming here was none of my doing!" I protested. I would have said more, now that my tongue had found itself, but something in his eyes silenced me.

"I am aware of that," he said. "Had it not been so, you would not be alive to hear the words I speak to you now. Those words are simply put. You will be gone from this place by the rising of the sun. If you are not . . ."

He did not finish the statement. There was no need for him to do so. With a slight bow toward Pala, he departed. I was gazing after him when suddenly I heard Pala sharply take in her breath. Turning, I saw that there was now someone else within the hut in addition to Pala and myself. It was the white woman of the green-yellow eyes. How had she entered? There were no other entrances other than the one at which I had been looking, none! But even as my mind attempted to solve this riddle, it was straining to comprehend her speech:

"You were brought here because of the color of your skin. Those who brought you assumed you were of my Masters's people. The girl who came to you tonight assumed the same. She was offering you her blood." I staggered at the word, repeating it. "Blood," she said again. "My Master has gone now to receive the offering from her."

"I must put a stop to it!" I said with a determination I did not feel. But she touched my arm.

"No. The girl will come to no lasting harm. She makes the offering willingly. It is an honor for her to have been chosen."

The subject was closed, the strange-eyed woman having no more to say concerning this curiosity and having no more to say regarding the one she called her Master. "You now must go. I will escort you to the river."

"And you, what of you?" I asked. "Will you come with us?"

She smiled. "Your future, Giles Stanby, if you are to have a future, lies downriver. Mine, for the time being, remains here." But something in her tone told me she wished things were otherwise. I asked her then if I might gather up a fighting force and return to this place and effect her rescue. Again she smiled.

"No fighting force could you gather from the tribes downriver. They dare not come close to this region. Your being brought here was a single exception. Aside from that, Giles Stanby, you shall never find this village again. Never, regardless of how hard you try. Thus, I should not like to see you wasting in such a foolish escapade the life which has been saved. And now we have spoken enough. Remain here, both of you, until I can gather a proper escort."

She left and shortly thereafter returned. Then we proceeded on the trek outward from the village, toward the river. The escort, of two men in addition to herself, proved to be of little necessity until we reached a place where there were hidden a number of reed boats, whereupon the two well-muscled men shouldered the burden of one of them.

It was while we were walking through the dark jungle growth that my fever began to return. My eyes

began to blur and burn, and I now realized that Pala, too, was feeling similarly. "It is nothing for concern," the white woman told me. "Consider it merely a safety precaution on my part to insure your never being able to recognize where you have been." But I hardly could believe that my sickness was being induced by this woman! What kind of witchcraft might this be? Was I not a modern man, one who believed in the logic of Science, thus one who could not be affected by the so-called Dark Spirits? And yet as my eyes grew dimmer and dimmer, even while my legs still were able to continue to function, I knew indeed that I had entered and now was leaving the very realm of Dark Spirits, that the one she called her Master was of the Dark Side as was she herself, and that the mind of man, no matter how modern that man considered himself to be, could never fully comprehend the mysteries to which I had been a witness.

At last my ears heard the rushing of water, and I felt myself stepping into the reed boat. Now I could see nothing, only could I feel the touch of Pala at my side. Of things to be heard, there was but the water. There were no final words of parting, just the rush of the river. And then the feeling of movement.

When next my eyes cleared, this clearing being only partial, it was day. Our boat moved unguided with the current. We both were weak, Pala and I, she even more so than myself. Yet on that voyage downstream, a trip of undeterminable days just like that I had experienced going the opposite way, my Pala and I made tender love to each other several times. She was to be my woman, I vowed, vowing also to spend the remainder of my life with her people. But this was not to be. Before, however, reaching that part of my tale, I must

now mention a thing which then filled me with dread and which has caused me to wonder about the future fate of the brown girl I had decided to wed.

After several days of travel, she and I were once again preparing for the bliss of sexual union when, putting my arms quickly around her, I felt something strange under her body. She stiffened with fright and tried to hide whatever it was. And no wonder, because when, after pushing her forcefully aside, I saw what it was, I hardly could speak.

It was the golden disc which the one called Kabaya had dropped to the floor of the hut in which we had been held. My Pala had stolen this treasure! Frantically I thought to myself that the golden object, still on its chain of yellow, must be returned! But how, *how*? I closed my eyes in grief, speaking to Pala in words she could not comprehend of the terrible things which might happen because of her gold lust. She, however, only clutched the disc more closely to herself, and would not let me even touch it, for fear, perhaps, that I would heave it over the side of the boat. Indeed, the thought occurred to me more than once, but I allowed her wishes to prevail.

The rest is shortly told, and best told shortly because, even now, it pains me to think back upon it. We eventually found ourselves in the midst of her people who viewed her as someone having returned from the dead, who elevated her to reverence, revering not only her but also the golden bauble she now wore openly, a thing none of her tribesmen dared to touch or even to look upon too closely. As for myself, I was viewed as a horror, as a bringer of sickness and death, and I was expelled from the village at the points of many spears. I could not stay, but I pleaded with Pala to come with

me. But she, on her part, was a queen now. It is painful for me to record this truth. I would like to be able to write that there were tears in her eyes as we looked upon each other for the last time, but that was not so. There were no tears, not even a wistful look. Not for me. For my Pala who was no longer *my* Pala could look at nothing other than the bright golden disc which she fondled with caressing touches. The pain I felt then was acute, but as I turned my back for the last time upon the girl and her people I had the very strong sense that there would be more pain to come which would be associated with that golden disc.

Though I personally might have no further part in it, I felt as a certainty that the history of pain, and death, resulting from Pala's theft had just begun.

CHAPTER SIX

Cam Sanchez closed the old brown leather-covered book and placed it on the empty seat of the twin-jet aircraft next to him. *The history of pain and death*. He thought over the words. He had little idea of what had transpired in the interim of almost three centuries, but the Disc of Osce in just the past twenty-four hours had managed to be involved in the deaths of three people and in his own personal problem—namely, an all-points bulletin throughout the greater New York City area. That, for the time being, he didn't have to be too concerned about. For the time being.

He had been aware of the problem from the beginning, the previous night when he told Ktara to get the Cadillac off the East River Drive and move toward the West Side of Manhattan. They had just signed off from their brief session with Harmon, and she was heading the big car out to Long Island. "You don't need me out there," Cam told her forcefully.

She looked at him, absorbing his thoughts, but he wasn't sure she was convinced. "Look. They'll have an APB out on me within the hour—correct?"

"Perhaps, but—"

"No buts. You're lovely, intelligent, and have the wisdom of the centuries on your side. But you said it yourself. I know something about how the New York police work. Turn there—"

Still not sure, she nonetheless did what he told her. The Cadillac slipped onto Fourteenth Street.

"And watch the speed," he warned her. "The last

thing I want to do right now is waste time arguing with a traffic cop.”

“You think they will go to the house?” she asked.

“Both of them,” he replied, meaning that in addition to searching for him at the Westhampton place they also would be scurrying around the old brownstone that Harmon owned in the East Eighties of Manhattan. “They’ll be there by the time you get back, I’ll give you odds on it.”

“I don’t normally gamble, Mr. Sanchez.”

“Ah, but these are not normal times,” he said.

She returned his smile, hers suddenly fading when it caught the thought he currently was playing with. “Mr. Sanchez, I’m not sure that—”

“I am. Just find me the man I’m looking for. The closer to Eighth Avenue, the better—but find him. Your all-seeing mind ought to be able to do that much for an old friend.”

“Very well.” She touched two buttons on the arm rest of the door. The side front windows glided down automatically, letting the chill of the night into the car interior. Cam recognized that, although uncomfortable, it was a necessity. The powers of Ktara were many, but they could be inhibited. Fire, for example, could drain her of all her power. Steel was one substance that her mental powers could not pierce. But with the windows in the down position . . .

“Target located,” she said dryly.

Cam checked the street sign at the next intersection. Fifth Avenue. “Try for something closer to Eighth.”

Two blocks later: “There’s your man,” she said, pulling the big black car over to the curb. “Do you see him?”

But Cam was already out of the door. He leaned

back into the window for a moment, gesturing toward the glove compartment where he had stashed the Magnum. "When you come calling for me, bring a replacement. The cylinder sticks from the fall." He brandished the miniature communicator he'd extracted from the door pocket. "I'll be in touch."

As Ktara pulled the car from the curb, Cam watched it go, then he found the man Ktara had located for him. He was about fifty years old, his clothes damp and dirty. But there were two things to the good. One was his unconscious state, induced by the wine he'd drunk, as indicated by the empty wine bottle that lay at his side in the doorway in which he slumped. The second was the hat he wore. An old, wide-brimmed, large hat. Cam tried it on. Ktara be praised, it was an almost perfect fit. "Here, old friend—here's for the hat, or a few bottles of wine, whichever you need the most," Cam said, placing a twenty dollar bill in the man's jacket pocket. Then he was gone, the hat pulled down well over his hairless head. The hat might well attract attention, but surely it would be less than his unadorned skull.

He took the Eighth Avenue subway north to Forty-Second Street, then walked down one block to the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Fifteen minutes later he was on a bus heading toward New Jersey. There had been a number of policemen around the terminal, but there was no stakeout. Cam knew the signs. Maybe Navarre wouldn't even bother with the bus terminals, knowing that his quarry traveled in higher style. Even so, if the words all-points bulletin were flashed, the stations would be covered as a matter of routine. His advantage now was that he'd slipped through that net, New Jersey being a place they'd hardly think of looking for him. New Jersey? As far as he could recall, he'd been in that

state only three times in his entire life!

At six-forty in the morning, Cam stepped outside the all-night diner where he'd consumed two cups of mudlike coffee and flicked on the communicator.

The response came immediately. "Harmon."

"Is it safe to talk?"

"For now. Sandy Proctor just told me over the telephone that there are some people on their way here with a search warrant. As you might suspect, there is something downstairs I'd rather no one see. We have the station wagon just about loaded and ready to roll. Where are you?"

"Elizabeth." He gave the complete address.

Harmon gave him another. "I'll see you there as soon as possible. Meanwhile, another problem. I've had no success in getting in touch with our usual pilot. Can you give it a go—or make other arrangements?"

"I think so. Hell, I know so."

Harmon agreed that under the circumstances knowing would be best.

Their talk over, Cam went back inside the diner, ordered breakfast from the sleepy girl behind the counter and got a handful of change for the pay phone in the corner. It took him three calls to track down his man. The first call was to his home, where the telerecorder faithfully gave a second number at which he could be reached. "But unless it's urgent, let it wait, okay? Barbara's a light sleeper." Barbara turned out to be just that, and a cross awakener too, if the snarl with which she answered the first ring was any example. "He's not here, and I don't give a damn where he is!" Cam's voice turned to ice. "Look, baby, maybe you do and maybe you don't, but if you know and you don't tell, he's gonna be plenty mad. And who do you think he'll be tak-

ing that out on—who?” She calmed down. “All right. She’s just a temporary thing with him anyway, you know that?” When Cam said she was probably right, he got the number he wanted. “Good thing for you that I keep tabs on him. *Her name is Gladys. Gladys! Bow-legged, too.*”

Cam cut her off and dialed again. A man answered. His man. “Name your landing strip, but get that plane of yours down near Elizabeth within two hours. Can be done?”

“Can be, I guess. At your usual and generous rates, I assume.”

“Money, as usual, speaketh,” Cam said. “Two hours. Wait there for me—as long as it takes. Where?”

The location of the strip was given. “But two hours! Look, I’m right in the middle of—”

“Two hours. Cut it short, friend. Besides, I hear she’s bow-legged.”

“How—”

But Cam cut the connection. Breakfast was ready. It was lousy.

When the station wagon pulled up to receive Cam at the predetermined intersection, Ktara opened the rear door for him. As he entered the vehicle, he looked behind the back seat. The familiar, long packing crate was in its familiar place.

“Any trouble?” he asked.

Harmon turned around from the front seat. “None we couldn’t handle.”

But Cam had already noticed that the special gear was connected to the driver’s side of the cab—the hand brakes and accelerator unit. “You drove out?”

Harmon laughed. “Part of the way, yes. Me and my

baggage—and my black cat. They stopped me just outside of my property line. They wanted to search the house, they said, but they'd be quite happy to start with the back of the wagon. That long crate, well now, they thought I just might have hidden an employee of mine inside."

"They searched . . ."

Harmon laughed. "We really couldn't let them do *that!* Fortunately, Ktara—"

"Say no more." No more needed to be said. Cam had accompanied that crate through enough Customs facilities to know how a simple flash from Ktara's eyes could make the officials forget there was a gigantic crate passing under their noses. But there was something he did want somebody to say something about. "I figured we'd be leaving. Mind telling me to where?"

"Miami," Harmon said. "There we change planes. That was something I had to arrange myself, the second plane. We needed somebody with unorthodox clearances for Brazil. This particular pilot has some excellent contacts."

"Brazil," Cam repeated. "That's where our friends are going?"

Harmon nodded. "That's where they're going. The problem is, they'll no doubt get there first." He went on to explain this bit of knowledge. After he and Ktara had left the Westhampton house this morning, she had insisted he make a slight detour. To Kennedy International Airport. He remained in the car while she investigated—in her own personal way. "It was at the Pan Am counter that she got the reading. They'd left less than an hour before. Figuring roughly that it's an eight-hour flight from New York to Brasilia, they should be there sometime before we hit Miami. We've

got a chance to close the gap a little, seeing we'll be going, not to Brasilia, but to Manaus—but we'll need one whale of a lot of luck to come really close."

"Manaus—that's where the book says all the treasure is?"

It was Ktara who answered. "That, Mr. Sanchez, you may determine for yourself. Professor Harmon brought along his copy for your reading enjoyment."

And so, on the way to Miami Cam took advantage of the time to dip into Sir Giles' stilted prose.

"You didn't like it?" Ktara asked from across the aisle of the small plane.

Cam frowned. "I can see why there are so few copies of the thing around. Not exactly of best-seller quality. But there are a few details missing. Namely, I can't see how Stanby's description could help anybody locate where he was—he never knew himself."

"It couldn't help anyone, not at all. You would have to know already at least the general location."

"Then why did our friends bother stealing the book? Why kill for something that couldn't help?"

Ktara shook her head. "But it did help. It confirmed, in Sir Giles' own words, the *existence* of the Land of the Disc. It was the existence that was doubted, not its location. And that had to be firm before our—as you call them—*friends* decided to undertake what might well be a dangerous mission in very hostile country."

Cam thought for a moment. "What you're saying is that they know where this Land of the Disc is."

"Pala knows, yes. She knows—at least generally."

"Pala? That was the name of—"

"And it has continued to be so. From generation to generation, the first daughter born has been given that

name. The present Pala carries in her veins the blood of that first Pala and that of Sir Giles Stanby as well."

Cam's eyebrows furrowed. "You've known this all along?"

"No. Some of it I managed to glean from the vibrations at the apartment of Dr. and Mrs. Thurlow's murder, the rest of it at that young man's place. They were waiting for him for some time, and Pala did quite a bit of thinking."

"So. Sir Giles Stanby's Pala was a thief—and so is her progeny. He was lucky to have lost the lady."

"Very. She would have had him killed. Fortunately, as you might learn if you complete his words." Cam frowned. "Well, anyway, after a few days of starving moving up the coast, he wandered into a Portuguese encampment and was held prisoner for a time until it was decided to ship a group of prisoners further up the coastline to another settlement. On route the Portuguese vessel was attacked by a Dutch ship, after which—"

Cam held up his hand. "The hell with Sir Giles and his latter-day fun and games. Pala—that's the one who's interesting."

"Very," Professor Harmon agreed from the seat behind. He looked to Ktara who, in turn, nodded.

"Well, you must realize first of all that the golden disc was, from the beginning, an object of complete awe among Pala's tribespeople. Something from the Dark Land, which over subsequent years began to be called the Land of the Disc. Pala herself, by association, became a person of complete reverence, a person feared for her new power."

"She was a witch, then—a medicine woman?" Cam asked. "The disc actually has magical powers?"

“Originally, the disc was merely of symbolic importance. There were four, very ancient. One for each of the four elements—fire, air, earth, and, of course, water. But, yes, Pala reached the status that is best described in the words you have used. The awe in which she was held helped her perform acts of healing and acts of harm as well.”

Cam understood. It was much the same sort of thing he had witnessed when they had battled the voodooists in Jamaica. “And the so-called talent? This was passed on from generation to generation?”

“Through the firstborn daughters, yes. They also received the story of how the original Pala came by the golden disc of power.”

“Disc of power,” Harmon repeated. “A moment ago, in speaking of it, you answered Cam’s question by saying that *originally* it was merely symbolic. Logically, that leaves the possibility that—”

“Yes,” the girl said. “An object that is used again and again in works of magic sometimes can take on real powers. It may have happened with the disc. There were vibrations . . .” But Ktara had no more to say on that question.

Harmon moved to another.

“There’s something I don’t quite understand,” he said. “Why didn’t you—or the count—”

“Intervene?” Ktara’s eyes flashed. “We might have, had we not had to leave the area a short time thereafter. We were fairly secure in the belief that no one from the coast would dare to try the adventure of raiding our village. In addition to the original—and well-founded—fears of the tribesmen, Pala herself cautioned against such rash action. She, after all, did not want to see her powers lessened by others who

might be fortunate enough to live through the experience and bring back golden relics."

"All right. My turn," Cam said. "Something *I* don't understand. If all this knowledge was passed down to each succeeding Pala, why did the present one have to bother getting Sir Giles' book? You said before that she wanted it to prove the existence of the Land of the Disc. But she should have known that anyway."

Ktara smiled. "She of course had *heard* all about it. But for an educated girl—and she is that, having a degree in psychology from the University of Sao Paulo—the story was little more than an old tribal myth. Until. *Until* it occurred to her to have an expert look at her disc. When that expert threw up his hands, not being able to identify it, but thinking that *perhaps* it was Babylonian in design, she began to think. Unfortunately, at about the same time she ran across an article by Dr. Wesley Thurlow and the name of Giles Stanby—how do you say?—yes, it rang the bell."

Cam said nothing for the moment. Then: "The men with her?"

"One is named Santos. The one with the knife collection, the use of which he has mastered well. He is known to the police of several countries, and is as wily in his mind as he is with his throwing hand. That is why, when Pala decided to mount her quest, she decided to marry Mr. Santos."

"A match made in heaven," Cam sneered.

"Rio de Janeiro, actually," countered Ktara. "The other man, the one who engaged you with his boot, is not Brazilian but Argentinian. He calls himself El Cobra."

A nice threesome, Harmon thought to himself, but

then a strange smile crossed his face. What would that threesome think of the three who now were headed toward the same objective?

And what would they think of the fourth who now rested within the heavy packing crate?

At Miami, movement from the one plane to the second was swift, as was their takeoff. The pilot of the new aircraft was efficient and managed to beat their estimated arrival at Manaus by almost a full hour. As they crossed the landing strip, Harmon was about to express the hope that they had beaten the others, when Ktara, standing stock-still and facing north, shook her head. "They have a five-hour advantage."

"Five hours," Cam said. "That's not much. Not if they don't know precisely where they're going. An overgrown jungle village, no matter how much glittery gold it contains, won't be that easy to find."

Ktara looked at Cam with level eyes. "They do not have to know *precisely* where they are going, Mr. Sanchez. They will be intercepted before they get close to the village—which, far from being overgrown, is exactly the way it was when Giles Stanby visited there. You see, the problem of the three intruders would take care of itself—that is, it would if Kabaya could be completely trusted."

"Kabaya," Harmon repeated. "The same name as—"

"The same," Ktara said.

Cam spoke hesitantly. "Then, as in the case of Pala, from generation to generation . . ." But he stopped. Somehow he knew he was on the wrong track. Ktara

confirmed it.

“No, Mr. Sanchez. The name is the same, *and so is the man!*”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“You are fully satisfied with everything, yes?”

The little man whose name was Passos shouted above the twin engines of the motor launch, which moved swiftly up the Amazon. The young woman did not seem to hear him, her eyes concentrating on the northern shoreline, toward which she had directed a bright spotlight, as if looking for some kind of special markings in the night. The little man, however, knew that there was nothing at all special about anything out there except a few excitable Indians, and they were not usually all that eager to take on a boatful of people, especially a boat that had arms aboard. And there were

arms aboard, plenty of them.

Passos, of course, was curious as to why he had been hired to arrange for the arms as well as the boat and the provisions. He surmised that they were planning to go somewhere inland, but his agreement was that he would take the party to that point and then return with the boat to Manaus. How they would get back to Manaus themselves he did not ask. He was curious, but it was none of his business. He was being paid well for the part that was his concern, and that was all that mattered.

Still, a man could not help but be curious.

The big one, the one they called El Cobra, this one was a killer, there was no doubt about that, and from the look of him he would not need either that big .45 automatic that hung in its shoulder holster around his naked chest or the 9mm thirty-shot, semiautomatic carbine that leaned against the stern of the boat. El Cobra sounded Spanish, and the few words the big man had spoken had been in that language, but the look of him was somehow German. Perhaps it was the close-cropped black hair that came out of his ridged skull like short but sharp porcupine quills. In any case, this one was mean and deadly, with the face of an angry snub-nosed turtle. And to kill, his hands would be enough—Passos was sure of it.

Then there was Santos. Yes, Passos had heard much of this one, with the evil face and devillike mustache, who had also engaged in activities that were considered illegal by those in authority. He was a kind of legend, this Santos with the steel eyes and the devil mustache and the almost skeletal frame. As quick with a knife as the snake with its fangs—and just as deadly. It was

Santos who had contacted him to make the arrangements. "It will be ready, Mr. Santos," he had assured him over the telephone. "It had better be, Passos. I do not like it when my orders are not obeyed strictly," Santos had replied.

And yet this Santos—and the other, the big one, as well—they seemed always to wait for the woman to make the decisions, to say what they should do next. The woman . . .

She stood at the right front of the boat, her eyes trying to pierce the darkness. In the black tight-fitting one-piece costume they called a jumpsuit—at least, that's what Passos thought they called it—she looked like a combat marine, especially with the loosely fitted holster that caused the six-inch barrel .38 to rest tauntingly upon her right hip. There was also that piece of jewelry she wore around her neck. Passos had seen much gold in his time, but this piece must be worth a small fortune. To wear it as she did, right out in the open, that took daring. But he had no doubt in his mind that she had all the daring that might be required—for anything. The fact that both of the men deferred to her, that they had stood idly by as *she* inspected the boat and the weapons, that said something more than any words could say.

So it was obvious to Passos that she was the one he had to make sure he pleased.

"Mrs. Santos—like I ask, you are fully satisfied?" he repeated again.

The woman—girl, really, except that she was married, after all—looked at him and smiled. Passos did not much like that smile.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Santos, to have disturbed you, but—"

"Disturbed me? Why do you say that?"

He stammered. "W-Well, I-I . . ."

The smile grew wider. "Passos, you have done very well by us, if that is your question." Her eyes flickered toward the man at the wheel and the two bearers who squatted in the stern. All three were Indians. "You have selected three excellent men for us, the boat functions well, and the weaponry and supplies are adequate to our needs. Why do you again ask me if I am satisfied? If I were not, you would have known about it long before this. We have, after all, been on the river for some hours now."

"I know that, madam, I truly do. I only—"

"You only wanted to know whether or not your payment would be generous, is that not so?"

"I thought perhaps that, well, I thought—"

"You thought perhaps that you would be cheated? Look, Passos, look at what is in my hand."

He looked. She was taking the golden pendant from around her neck. Surely *this* was not his payment!

"Look at it, Passos . . ."

He looked. He could not help himself from looking. The design, the intricate lines of the disc, it was a marvel to behold. Except that it was moving—from side to side it was moving. Very difficult to keep his eyes on it, but yes he must do so. This beautiful thing . . .

"Pala," he heard Santos say. "There are easier ways to—"

But the woman cut him off. "There are levels of intelligence and will, my husband. Dr. Thurlow was strong in both, and he was able to resist until his physical strength was gone."

What was she talking about? Passos could not comprehend it. All he could do was to keep his eyes on that

moving thing of gold. Yet she talked on:

"The young student, you saw with your own eyes how easily he was handled. As compared to even his modicum of intelligence, this one is but a rabbit. You will see, my husband."

Some kind of argument, that's what it was—an argument between the woman and Santos. Passos knew that, if it came right down to it, he would take the woman's part, even if it meant that he'd have to come up against Santos—or the big one. Yes, this woman was so beautiful, so strong, so willful, that he would die for her—*die* for her!

And now she was speaking to him, to *him*!

"Your payment comes to you now, Passos. I wish you, however, to move to the rear of the boat. Will you do that for me? I do not wish the others to see."

He understood. The payment was such as she did not want her husband or the big one to see what it was. She was protecting him, that's what she was doing. And he felt within him a surge of thankfulness. That *she* would go out of her way to think of protecting *him*.

"Very good, Passos. Are you still looking at my golden disc? Yes, of course you are. That too is good. Now, I want you to listen to me very carefully. Will you do that?"

He tried to answer, but he could not find his tongue. It was difficult even to move his lips. While his gaze stayed on that slowly moving disc . . .

"Nod your head if you understand me," she said.

He nodded his head.

"Excellent. Now—"

But her voice broke off. Someone else was saying something. Passos thought it might have been the man at the wheel—or perhaps one of the two other Indians.

But he wasn't sure. He did hear, however, the words of the big man, and he thought he could hear the carbine action click into play.

"You move and you are dead," were the big man's words. And then Santos was talking:

"Pala—why? I even doubt it can be done."

And Pala answering him, rightly, through what Passos knew to be superior knowledge:

"The disc comes closer to its home, my husband. Its powers increase thereby."

"That is superstition!"

"Doubt, then, if that is your wish. But my wish is to experiment. You will not hinder me in doing so—do you understand me?"

Yes, yes! Passos' brain responded. You tell him—I will come to your aid if you ask. Ask, please! *Why do you not ask?*

And then she asked:

"Passos. I have been told by my husband that what I am about to do is an impossibility. He thinks, he and many people who have studied the human mind, that no person can be made to do a thing under the influence of hypnosis that would endanger his own life. But I know that is not so. I *know* that, Passos. You know it too, don't you? You know it because I know it. Is that not so?"

Passos' head bobbed. He was eager to shout to the stars above that he agreed, but somehow all he could manage was this simple head movement. But, yes, he knew . . .

What? What was it he knew?

Yes. Whatever it was she had said that he knew. That was it. Ah—and now she was telling him:

"Behind us, Passos—behind us is the dark water of

the River Amazon. Is that so?"

He nodded yes.

"No! That is *not* so!"

He shook his head no. Even as he did, he wondered. Surely, it *looked* as if—

"*Not* water, Passos. That is what my husband tells me—that all that blackness out there is really water. But you and I know different. It is not water."

He nodded agreement.

She laughed. It was so good to hear her laugh. He had pleased her by his response, and it was good. He knew that the payment he was going to receive was going to be something very special, but somehow even that did not make so much difference now. The important thing was—well—that he had made her laugh, made her happy.

"Not water," she said. "But grass. Green, lush grass. Cool, so cool. Is not that right?"

Again Passos nodded.

"Then, show us. Show my husband who does not believe us—we *know*, but he does not believe. Show us, Passos. *Show us!*"

Passos had one foot up on the rail when he heard the loud booming chatter. He almost took his eyes from the golden disc, but he could see what he had to see without doing so, and he was grateful for that. One of the Indians had stood up, probably interfering with what he was going to do. He didn't believe the woman, obviously. But the one called El Cobra, he had used the carbine. Yes, it was El Cobra, because now he was speaking softly. Passos could hear:

"One of you other *senors* want the same thing, you just move too—okay?"

"Passos?"

Yes, madam. He wanted to say that, wanted to be sure she knew that he hadn't been distracted from the business at hand. But again all he could do was nod. Her smile, though, told him that the fact that he could not speak somehow pleased her even more than if he had spoken. He nodded again just to be sure she understood.

"And now, Passos, you will climb from this boat and show us how one walks upon the cool grass."

Of course he would do it. How could he *not* do it? She wanted him to. Yet, somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought that he should not leave the boat without taking something with him. Yes, the payment. They—she—owed him payment for the things he'd gathered for them—for her. He was about to formulate some words regarding this thought, when he understood. The disc. Yes, that was it. All he had to do to gain his reward was to gaze at the disc—and her eyes, her burning commanding eyes—those things were his reward, enough of a reward for the small thing he had done for her . . .

"Now, Passos."

Yes, now. He stepped over the rear wall of the boat and onto the cool grass. Grass, yes, that was what she said it was and that was what it had to be—*had to be!* But—

Wetness, coldness. Of course, the dew. Yes . . . but should the dew cover him so thoroughly, should the water get into his mouth and his nose and—

He screamed. Or, better said, he tried to. His open mouth received so much of the water under which he was submerged that, instead of a scream, there was little more than a gagging, choking, gurgling . . .

And now mentally he screamed as his arms pawed their way upward to the surface.

He almost made it when the first crocodile struck.

There were others, he noticed, just before his mind screamed the scream the water would not allow his lungs to make heard.

Twenty minutes later the launch still moved up river. The Indian at the wheel was perspiring heavily, as was the other Indian, who sat Buddha-style with his face toward the starboard rail. Both were silent. The Cobra cleaned his carbine with efficient movements. As for Santos, he kept his eyes on his wife, who, again, watched intently the shoreline to the north.

"You think that you have proved something?" he asked quietly.

She seemed to ponder her answer. "You were going to have Passos killed, were you not?"

"I was," he replied matter of factly.

"Then I have saved you the bother."

"It would have been no bother, my love. What bothers me is that you chose to argue the point."

She turned to him, her smile full—the kind of smile that he recognized was for him alone. Her eyes flickered swiftly toward the Cobra, who did not notice. But Santos noticed. "My husband, along the road we travel we sometimes must discard unneeded items. Correct?"

"Excess baggage," he grinned, his mustache seeming to curl evilly. "Yes, there are times when we must rid ourselves of such. I suspect that we will be faced with that again—so?"

"So," she replied. "And now, please allow me to concentrate. The place where we will stop is not far

from our present location.”

“You are certain?”

“The description has been faithfully passed down, even to my generation, my husband.”

“You had better be right, my wife. A lot has been gambled upon this truth of yours. You had better be right on the target.”

As if on cue, she drew in her breath. “I think—I *know!* We are here!”

“You are certain?” Santos asked.

She directed the bright light toward the water’s edge. “As certain as I am of death,” she answered.

And as Santos looked at the vacant spaces in the curiously formed white rock that protruded from the dark jungle leaves, he thought for one cold moment that he was looking into the eyes of death itself.

Perhaps it was a premonition. He was not all that wrong.

He didn’t like it, Santos didn’t. He didn’t like it at all. The pathway through the dense forest was too well preserved, too clear. He wanted to mention this to Pala, but he did not. He didn’t know exactly why, but he knew it had something to do with fear. Yes, it was true. He was beginning to fear this girl—this young woman who was so much wiser than her years, this wife of his . . .

Wife. She *was* his wife, he should remember that. Why should a man have reason to fear the woman he was wed to? Especially when that man was one such as Santos, why? Other men feared even to speak his name. He had seen men turn bone white—like that great ugly death’s head at the river—when Santos had shown but a small measure of being displeased. He had



Micronite filter.
Mild, smooth taste.
America's quality
cigarette.
Kent.

King Size or Deluxe 100's.

Kings: 16 mg. "tar," 1.0 mg. nicotine; 100's: 19 mg. "tar," 1.2 mg. nicotine;
Menthol: 18 mg. "tar," 1.3 mg. nicotine; av. per cigarette, FTC Report Sept. '73.



*Try the crisp, clean taste
of Kent Menthol.*

The only Menthol with the famous Micronite filter.

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health

built his reputation that way. He had killed men for the smallest of infractions. Dramatically killed them, with a flick of his wrist sending one of his knives through their eyes or open mouths or pinning their throats to a wall or severing their genitals from their bodies. Santos. A name to be feared. A man who killed at whim.

A man who had just killed—against his will.

It was some forty minutes earlier. The Indian handling the boat had been ordered to steer toward the grinning skull. He had protested.

"No, missus—no. That place bad. Death place."

She had turned and looked at him coldly. "Do as I say—or the deck of this boat will be your death place. El Cobra?"

There was the *clack* of the repeater rifle. After which Pala spoke more softly. "You need not fear," she said. "There is no reason to fear. You will not have to step one foot upon the shore. I promise you that."

"You promise?" It was obvious that the pilot did not completely trust the woman, which under the circumstances was more than understandable.

"I always keep my word. What is your name?"

"Tago," the man said warily. He was a muscular man, and as he spoke there were ripples of tension in his arms.

"Then, Tago, kindly move this boat to shore. I will keep my word, I promise you."

"Yes, missus." The boat moved slowly toward land, directly to the left side of the skull-shaped rock. When the prow of the craft lifted gently upward upon the silty bottom, the woman smiled reassuringly at the wheelman.

"You see? You have kept your part of the bargain. Now I keep mine."

The hammer of the .38 in her hand cocked back. "You will not have to step one foot upon the shore—just as I promised."

The Indian named Tago froze, his eyes wide with fear. "Missus—"

"No, Pala." It was Santos who interfered, an interference that was not at all welcome, as the woman's curled lips told him. "No," he repeated. "The noise. We need no gunshot to alert every savage within miles of here."

The curling of the lips continued into a full smile. "Excellent thinking, my husband. Use one of your knives."

"There is no reason to kill this man."

"When have you ever needed a reason? *Kill him!*"

But Santos had not wished another death. "It is two men we have murdered already this night. To kill three times this night, the omens do not look good to me. There—down there. That death rock. I do not think—"

"You think too much, Santos. Either you kill him or I will. Better yet, I shall have the Cobra shoot him. What do you say, my Cobra?"

"The Cobra, he works for *me!*" Santos cried. He looked at the big man. But the big man was looking at neither Santos nor his wife. His eyes were on the other Indian who crouched in fear at the rear of the boat.

"My husband?"

There was silence. It lasted perhaps for only a moment or two, but to Santos it seemed composed of many hours, maybe a lifetime. When that silence ended, it ended with a short cry. A final cry—the cry of one Indian named Tago who saw the flashing blade coming toward his throat.

Santos retrieved the knife as his wife laughed softly. She told the Cobra to dispose of the body. The big man obeyed, and there was the splash of the dead Tago meeting his watery grave.

"Excellent, my Cobra," Pala said. "It was good that you did not allow our friend's body to touch the land. Otherwise, my promise to him might have been violated."

The Cobra smiled, a smile that Santos tried to analyze. He had said just now that the Cobra worked for him—and now, right now, he wasn't all that sure anymore. Even while the thought came to him, his wife was speaking to the remaining Indian, telling him that, unless he wanted the same unmarked burial ground, he had better cooperate, that he had better shoulder the packs and go unprotestingly with the three of them into the jungle. "You fear this place, I know that," she said. "But the curse of this place is uncertain. Unless you do as I say, your fate is very certain. You have seen the results of going against my will. You must ask yourself—now—whether you will choose life or death. The choice is yours. But you must choose now."

The result was predictable. The Indian moved swiftly to do her bidding. Just as had the Cobra.

Just as had Santos himself.

He thought about that now, forty minutes after the incident, forty minutes—the first ten of which they had pushed their way through heavy vegetation. Then they had hit upon the cleared trail. Pala had looked somewhat surprised, then she smiled. She said nothing, however. Nothing. Santos had wanted to ask her what she thought it meant, had wanted to tell her that he did not at all like this development. But he did not.

"We follow the trail," she said. "The trail will take us

to what we seek.”

What we seek. The words echoed in Santos’ brain. What is it we are seeking? Asking himself that, the response that kept coming into his mind was that grinning skull rock.

Death. That is what we are seeking. Death.

And he suddenly felt alone. This killer of many men—men whose number he never had bothered to tally—suddenly felt alone.

And he was, for the moment.

For exactly that long.

There was no sound, that was the uncanny part. No sound at all. But suddenly they stopped. Santos, Pala, the Cobra, and the bearer. All at once, they all stopped. Each knew, something within each one of them signaling the fact that they were surrounded, completely encircled by invisible beings—invisible at present.

Pala spoke quietly. “Don’t move. Let them come to us.” As she spoke, she removed the golden disc from her neck and held it high. Santos’ fingers itched to wrap themselves around the hilt of his knife, but her words stopped him. *Stopped him.*

And suddenly he knew the substance of the feeling he had only been guessing at previously. Fear, yes. That was part of it. He had the fear of the unknown. But the reason he feared his wife—that was because somehow all this, all of it, was *not* unknown to her. Somehow she belonged here, and he did not. This was her world in some way—in some way other than simply knowing about the treasure because of her mother’s stories. This *was* her world. It was not his.

"They will come to us. I know it," Pala whispered. And, as she did, they were there.

Santos gasped. The Indian bearer fell to his knees. The Cobra did nothing at all. He simply waited, his rifle ready.

There were at least twenty of them, strong-looking Indians in plain, undecorated breechclouts. But otherwise they were far from undecorated. They wore pure gold bands around their wrists and biceps. On their heads were curious helmets, almost in the style of the German World War II models. Steel, obviously. But the most curious thing—to Santos, at least—was the symbol they wore about their necks. Gold, yes. But it was the symbol of the cross. Was this, then, a civilized tribe? As soon as he had asked the question, his eyes took in the very sharp-tipped spears each of them carried. Golden-tipped, but discolored. Obviously poisoned. No, they were savages, all right. But just as he decided on that truth, his wife blasted it to bits.

She turned to one of the men. "Do you understand this tongue?" she asked him in English.

In English he answered, "I understand."

"In that case, what are your instructions?"

He looked at her blankly. "My instructions are to slay anyone who dares—"

"I dare!" Pala snapped. Her eyes flashed to the golden medallion that, its chain held high, swung close to the side of her head. "I dare. You will take me to your village. Without delay."

The man simply looked at her. "I must slay—"

"You do not recognize this disc?"

"Disc . . ."

Santos laughed to himself. Pala had the man! His

eyes now bulged. Of course, there were the others, and she could not hypnotize twenty men. But then she did not have to.

"You will take us to your village," she said.

The man was silent for a time. "Your faces are white."

"Yes," she said.

"You are *she* of whom legends are told?"

"I am she, yes. And these are my friends."

"And him?" He pointed to the Indian. "He carries things. It is a rule of Kabaya that no *things* from outside come into our realm. They are your things?"

"Yes."

"Then it is your things that may not enter."

"May *not*?"

"It is Kabaya's rule."

Santos noticed that this time, as with the time before, his wife seemed to shudder at the word *Kabaya*. He recognized the name, that of the Indian ruler of the village the original Pala had entered. But why should *this* Pala, the one who was his wife, react to the name in that way? And why—*why*—should she ask the next question she asked:

"You have seen me before?"

"No, but Kabaya will know," the Indian answered. "If you are not who you claim to be, you will die—you and your companions who are white of skin. The other one—the one of my color—he may not come with us."

Pala's teeth showed white as she turned. "If our *things* may go no farther, he who bears our things is no longer needed. Cobra—"

Two shots fired from the Cobra's carbine. The Indian died before he had a chance to protest. Pala smiled at the smoking barrel and at the big man who

held it. Then she turned to the Indian she had been speaking to.

"Our weapons. Do you wish us to leave them also?"

The Indian shook his head. "No. Kabaya is interested in modern weaponry. You may bring all weapons."

"You are not concerned about our using them?"

He smiled. "Not at all. If you are who you say you are, you will not use them against us. If you are not, then you might try—but there are many spears surrounding you, is that not so?"

That was so—very so. So much so that Santos no longer itched to grasp one of the knives strapped around his body.

"Let us proceed," the Indian said. "Kabaya—"

He stopped suddenly, his ears cocked as if listening. But listening to what? Santos could hear nothing. Nothing except . . .

Yes. Something . . .

Yes, something like—like wings flapping. Large, heavy wings, up there in the darkness among the leaves of the high trees.

"Wait!" the Indian commanded. Then he said something in a language Santos had never heard before. It was another command, this one to the others in his band. As if in one motion, they all did the same thing.

They grasped the chains that held the crosses and lifted them high into the air. They kept the crosses in that position for what seemed to Santos to be an eternity. Then, at the leader's signal, they pulled their arms down, the golden symbols of Christianity once more resting on their chests.

Santos no longer could hear those wings—wings that had seemed to him to be almost, well, *leathery*. But

he had no further opportunity to think about it. The Indian leader once again stressed that they must move.

“Quickly. Kabaya waits.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“The dawn comes soon,” Ktara said.

Cam, at the wheel of the boat they'd rented, noticed no concern in her voice. Which meant that her Master was on his way back now, that he would reach them before the rays of the sun announced the newborn day. There will come a day when he doesn't make it back, Cam thought to himself. Of course, with Ktara near him, no thought was his alone.

“You would like that, Mr. Sanchez?” she asked him.

Cam said nothing, his head turning to look at Harmon. The old professor could have been taking a pleasure cruise, by the look of him. He sat in his wheelchair at the rear of the deck, looking at the passing

landscape as if he were a tourist. Cam smiled inwardly. Maybe that was the right way. Take things as they come, even when the things coming might be of the most deadly sort. The sort of thing that would shortly be inside that open pine coffin that rested before Harmon's chair. He laughed, this time out loud.

"Something amusing?" Harmon asked.

Cam was about to tell his boss, when his attention was diverted. He slowed down the engines, his eyes telling the others his direction of interest. They were about to round a slight bend in the river. At the bend there was something that appeared to be washed up on the shore. The engines now idling, it took little time for them to recognize the nature of the something. Something mangled.

"No," Cam said in response to Harmon's question. "Nothing amusing."

"He's small," Harmon observed. "The one called Santos?"

Ktara shook her head. Her eyes were closed. "Passos. That was his name. She murdered him. Pala. He has been dead for three hours. Crocodiles have fed upon him. We close the distance by degrees."

Facing the dead man, Cam made a quick sign of the cross. He was moving the boat forward again when something caught his ears. He recognized the sound of the batwings beating the air, recognized also the tensing of his muscles. The beating grew louder, then louder still. Then a black something with red eyes dropped from the sky, and there was a blurring transition of that creature from what it was to something that looked far more deadly.

Count Dracula's voice was thick. "Kabaya has

developed independent ideas." He looked into the eyes of Ktara. Both Harmon and Cam knew that she was learning all the vampire had seen, all he thought about what he had seen. But with four of them in this, two-way communication wasn't quite enough.

"You saw them?" Harmon asked. "You saw the ones we hunt?"

"I would have slain them," the count replied. "I would have had their blood."

Harmon flared. "We have spoken about that, Count! They must remain alive. Otherwise, Cam—"

"Will be tried for murder?" Dracula broke in. He smiled. "Why should he not be tried for killing another human being? He has committed the crime—he has killed, has he not?"

"They must not be slain," Harmon said coldly.

Ktara interrupted whoever it was who was going to speak next. All of the other three on board the boat seemed about ready. "The ones we hunt—to use your phrase, Professor—have been accepted by Kabaya's tribe. They no doubt are within the village at this time."

Harmon nodded, but his eyes were still on the count. "You said you *would* have slain them. You didn't, therefore this question: Why not?"

Count Dracula's eyes darted toward Cam's chest. "He wears sometimes the symbol that stops my progress. He wears it now."

"That's right," Cam said. "I've been wearing the cross since your pact with the professor expired."

Dracula laughed. "It will do you no good under your shirt, Mr. Sanchez."

Cam's hands left the wheel in a swift motion. "You

want me to wear it—*outside?*”

“Cam—”

Harmon’s warning was acknowledged by the count. “Thank you for intervening, Professor. For that, in my gratitude, when that day comes for the both of you to die at my hand—I shall allow you to live the longer of the two.”

“Dawn is not far off,” Ktara said quietly. “Professor Harmon has questions.”

“The answers, then, Professor,” Dracula said. “I did not kill them because I could not get near them. The symbol of Mr. Sanchez’s religion, the symbol far older than people of his religion could imagine—they wear it on their chests. Gold crosses—all of them wear it, all of them know its use. They have but to hear wings in the night, and they raise it against the sound. It was the same in the village. I visited there as well, but all too briefly. I could not stay, and for the same reason.” He looked at Ktara. “Our old friend Kabaya has planned very well. He wishes no intrusion and has done his best to assure that there is none. He is a clever man—as the three I would have slain may well find out for themselves.”

And now he looked at Cam. “You see, Mr. Sanchez, I may not even get the opportunity to deal with them as I would like. My old associate may accomplish the task before you and the good professor step foot on land.”

“There!” Ktara said. “There is their boat. And the rock.”

In the light of the beginning day, Cam could not miss either the boat or the great white rock. Yet, even though it was daylight, the look of the thing made him

uneasy inside. A perfectly carved death's head.

"No," she said. "Not carved, Mr. Sanchez. It is a natural rock. Brought here from elsewhere, that is true, but no human hand carved it. It is natural. As natural as the phenomenon of death itself."

"Such as the death of that one?" he asked through his teeth. He jerked his head downstream to a spot not thirty yards from them where the dead body of an Indian was tangled in the vegetation.

"She did not keep her promise," Ktara replied. "Her promise to him" was her only elaboration.

The boat was moved up onto the shoreline, after which Ktara laid out their next steps. Since neither Harmon nor Cam had any ideas that they felt were better, both agreed to hers, even though it was Cam's back that for the most part was being discussed.

First, there was the carrying of Harmon, piggyback style, from the deck and through the green growth for the five minutes of time until they came to the trail. Ktara, dear girl that she was, consented to carry the collapsible aluminum wheelchair. After Harmon was seated, Cam checked the underside to be sure that something hadn't dropped free. No, the snubnosed .38 was still in position in its clamp.

Next came the closed pine box, the nails having been inserted after the count had said his goodnights. Cam grunted under the weight, cursing to himself that he had insisted Ktara remain with the professor. He could have used just a bit of her telekinetic assistance in moving the great weight that consisted of the thick wooden crate itself, a quantity of dark soil from that place that Ktara referred to as the First Land, and the Dark Lord himself. The combined weight was bad enough, but two other things made his progress worse. The first was

the thickness of the vegetation before him, which his hands were not free to move, and the second was the handle of his .357 Magnum, which played havoc with the surface of his bent-over gut.

"I will assist you now," Ktara said as he entered the clearing. And, all at once, the weight on his back and shoulders was cut by two-thirds. She, in turn, directed the professor's chair.

"Thanks," Cam said as they moved off.

"Is that meant sarcastically, Mr. Sanchez?"

Something in the tone of her voice reminded him that, if she wanted to, that mind of hers could *add* weight as well as remove it.

"Sarcastic, ma'am? *Me?*" He grunted. "The only thing I am at all sarcastic about is our timing. If it were night, your Master could play a more physical part in his own personal mobility."

Ktara's eyes seemed to flash. "He will, Mr. Sanchez, I promise you that. He will—when it is night."

For the most part, Harmon's eyes remained straight ahead, looking for the movement he knew would come, the movement that would alert him to the fact that they no longer were alone, that they had at last entered the protected realm of the Indian ruler, Kabaya. Even so, as he glanced now and then at his watch, he could not but be impressed by the time they were gaining. He did not doubt that they'd been sighted already, that their presence was known. He felt it, deep down in that portion of his spine that was good for little else than signaling his brain that all was not as it should be. Why were they letting the three of them get so close? If indeed they were getting close. Yes, they had to be. Each roll of wheels of his chair brought him closer to this an-

cient village, each of Ktara's steps brought her that much closer, and each of Cam's—each of Cam's brought both Cam and the fourth member of their party that much closer to the savage who, as the count put it, had developed independent ideas.

His watch said nine-thirty. The sun was moving higher in its climb, drenching the damp jungle below with blasts of heat. His own brow was liquid, his clothes were soaked. Turning out of curiosity, he marveled to see that the woman who pushed his chair looked completely unruffled. Not a hair on her head was out of place, not the beginning of a bead of perspiration on her forehead or upper lip. And yet she wore the blackest of black. Slacks and a turtleneck sweater. *That* was mental control.

He looked back at Cam. Cam grinned sardonically. Yes, in their work together, Cam had shown his measure of control, too—and his mettle.

And he himself?

Well, it had been a good run so far. Far better than he had any right to demand or even ask for. This was, as so many of his previous adventures had been, a chase—and, for an old man such as himself, the thrill of the chase was sometimes the only thrill life afforded. It was beastly hot, yes. But the chase was on!

And this one had better succeed—else his assistant's life was at stake. True, Cam could be hidden away in a thousand different places, but the law could be relentless. Forget the fact that the charge was murder; remember only that Detective Lieutenant Hank Navarre wanted Cameron Sanchez's hide. That's all that really counted, a dedicated man who was relentless. Like Navarre. Like himself, for that matter.

"You think of many things," Ktara observed softly.

"But the contents of those thoughts? Have you yet gotten the key to unlock my mind?"

She smiled. "Not completely, Professor. The metal stops my probing as it always has and always will. But there is a certain mental—a mental *posture*—yes, a posture that you take on. I cannot pierce the essence of your thoughts, but I can tell their general characteristics."

"And?"

"And—I believe you ponder too much the imponderables."

Harmon's face grew taut. "There are many imponderables in life, Ktara. I find it so, and I daresay you do yourself. With all your years—"

His sentence cut off in midstream. He knew that right at this moment he should not be talking. Not to Ktara, not to Cam, not even to himself.

And especially not to any of the spear-carriers who suddenly had moved before and behind them.

It was one of them who broke the silence. A tall, thin Indian, whose finger pointed straight at Ktara.

"You. You are the woman of sharp teeth and green eyes and fur of black pitch."

Ktara spoke evenly. "I have been called *Kaykattra*. The woman who is cat."

"You will come with us." The words were half command, half question. The speaker was unsure of himself.

"Yes. I come. My friends come as well. These two."

A nod of the head. "It is so. You bring them with you. But all other things stay." His eyes moved to the big crate Cam carried. Cam, on his part, looked to Ktara. She nodded.

"Place the box down. It is better that our things re-

main here—for now.”

Cam thought he caught her meaning. In any case, he lowered the crate gently to the earth. It took very little reflection on his part to realize that in an all-out fight he was outnumbered—not to mention those mean-looking spears. With ends of gold. Like the bands they wore about their arms. Like the crosses he expected to see around their necks, but that were not there. On their heads, however—

“That is correct, Mr. Sanchez. The helmets are of steel,” Ktara said. “Kabaya knows of my powers. As my Master has said, Kabaya has planned very well.”

CHAPTER NINE

Santos was frightened out of his wits. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined anything such as this. That there might be a lost village deep within the jungle, that he had been prepared for. That there might be great quantities of gold, that too he had been prepared for, had hoped for. But this . . .

To the increasingly louder beat of the drums, which he assumed announced their coming, they had reached the village shortly after the sun had come up. The pace with which their guides had pushed them along the trail had been swift, and he and his two civilized companions were tired at the trail's end. Even so, their almost

exhausted minds could not help but spring to alertness at what they saw.

Gold everywhere. On all of the warriors, on all of the women, even the children he saw were playing with toys fashioned from the bright yellow metal. But the largest artifact made of the sun metal stood directly in the center of the village—or more precisely, on the top of the structure that was the central location.

It was a gigantic step pyramid, no doubt the one the Englishman had written of in that cursed book they had killed for in New York. Yet there were differences from that older description. There were, at the very top of the flattened structure, three things, all made of gold. Two of the objects were chairs, both large, but one was much larger and much more elaborately carved than the other. Behind them both—towering over them—loomed the third object.

It was a gigantic cross of gold. From its two outward arms hung dozens of golden chains, and dangling from their ends were smaller crosses. But as stunning to the senses as were these things, Santos' eyes were quickly drawn from them to the personage who stood before the larger of the two thrones. Even as Santos and his two companions were forced to halt at the foot of the pyramid, even as the sounds around Santos told him that the collection of weapons was going on around him, even as he knew that he was the center of attention of all the savages whose village he had entered, he could not but keep his focus on the brown-skinned man who stood above them.

He wore only the traditional breechclout of the other tribesmen, with no decoration. Like the others, he wore a circlet of gold around his huge biceps, which bulged mightily even though his arms seemed relaxed

in their crossed position before his chest. His frame was tall, taller than that of the Cobra. But his waist tapered in with a sharp V, causing his massive shoulders to look even stronger than they no doubt were. His legs were thick with muscle, as was the unadorned neck that held high his proud head.

White hair spilled down to shoulder level from under his helmet of steel. The age of the fierce face that looked down stonelike upon them was impossible to determine. It was smooth, but hard, much as if that smooth, white rock of the death's head had been polished with a brown wax. The eyes were set deep, so that Santos could not see them. It was then he realized that he did not wish to see them.

It was then that the drums stopped.

The silence around Santos suddenly became heavy, as if the dampness of the jungle had suddenly liquefied and was surrounding him, drowning him. He gasped for breath, and as he did, he heard from beside him a single word—a name.

"Kabaya!" Pala called upward.

The face above them did not seem to alter, yet the almost lipless mouth must have opened slightly. The voice of the man crashed into Santos' ears like thunder:

"Something that was taken from our village many years ago now has returned. Bring these three to me."

And now there were firm hands on Santos' arms. Firm but somehow soft—wrongly so. For the first time since entering this place he turned his eyes from the top of the pyramid—and was again to receive a shock.

The women—the two of them who guided him upward and those who similarly guided Pala and the Cobra—were completely naked except for a thin chain of gold that circled their hips. That was startling in it-

self, but even more startling was the physical perfection of the women—and the fact that their skin colors ranged from the pure white of the blonde girl who held his right arm to the jet black of the one who assisted Pala.

A trace of mild amusement showed on the face of the lone man before the thrones, but he said nothing as one of the nude women inclined her head to him and then passed behind to place a dozen or more chained crosses on the arms of the great cross that was to the rear of the golden chairs. His amusement did not seem to be directed toward Santos—no, the deep-set eyes of the huge Indian were focused on Pala.

“Release her,” he said. Santos did not like the idea that the grips on his arms still were as firm as ever, but he assumed Pala was freed in order that she might obey the chieftain’s next command.

“The Disc of Osce. You will present it to me now.”

“Gladly, Lord Kabaya,” Pala said. Stepping forward, she held the medallion high and swung it with a measured movement. “Look at it, my lord—this disc that I have returned to you.”

She stopped moving forward, but kept the medallion in motion. Back and forth, back and forth. Kabaya’s eyes seemed to follow it. His face did not change in expression, but his mouth opened slightly. The sound he made caused a shiver of fear to run down Santos’ spine.

It was a laugh.

“I have lived long, woman. Very long. Your tricks are as nothing to me, but I tell you this. Through your eyes I can see a woman of much cleverness. Your knowledge of the outside world is something that can be of use to me—if you wish to be of use to me.”

Santos awaited Pala’s response. How would his wife

"of much cleverness" deal with this, he wondered. Let her stew in her own juices for a change. It would be good to see. But her reply came almost before Santos had digested his own thoughts.

"Why else would I have come, my lord?"

Kabaya paused. "But you have brought these two with you," he observed.

Pala looked back at the two men. "I needed them. Now I no longer need them."

"*Pala!*" Santos cried. "How can you—"

"Silence," Kabaya commanded. He did not raise his voice, but the ominous sound of the command did not allow for any disobeying. He turned to the woman again. "You are saying that you would be free of them?"

Suddenly it was the Cobra who was talking. "I think, senor, I might have something to say on this thing."

Kabaya smiled thinly. "Release his arms." When the two nude girls had obeyed him, he spoke to the Argentine. "You would speak with your tongue or with your weapon?"

Weapons! Santos realized that he still had his knives with him—and that the Cobra still had both his carbine and his .45!

The Cobra, however, was cautious. There seemed to be no weapons up on the top of the pyramid, but below them were a hundred spears or more. All casually held in the hands of the Indians—but at a moment's notice . . .

"They will not interfere," Kabaya said. "Not unless I command them to do so. Tell me, do you think you can harm me with that weapon of yours?" When the Cobra did not answer, the Indian went on. "I suggest you try. It would be entertaining. Otherwise you will be the first

to die at my hand."

"Very well, senor," the Cobra said. The barrel of the carbine lifted smoothly. It spoke three times, sending three pieces of lead thudding into Kabaya's chest—at point-blank range.

The Indian took one step backward to regain the modicum of lost balance. His smile remained the same thin expression it had been.

"I have been given extended life by one of much power. Those of lesser power cannot take it from me, no matter what their weapons. You may retain yours—for the time being." He looked again at Pala, whose eyes now looked completely worshipful.

"You remind me of someone I once knew. Therefore you shall remain here to serve me. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You do so willingly? Not out of fear?"

"It is certain I fear Kabaya," Pala said softly. "But I commit myself to him not from fear, but from something other than fear, something that demands more loyalty than an emotion rooted in dread."

"Well said, woman. Well said. And what of these men?"

"Kill them."

"*Pala!*" Santos objected. "You cannot say—"

Kabaya's right forefinger pointed toward the thin man. "She can say what she wishes. From you I demand silence. As for you," the finger shifted to the Cobra, "you will not attempt to use that weapon of yours against the woman or any other of my village. If you should attempt such—" He raised a right hand. Below, the golden-tipped spears snapped up to at-ready positions.

Kabaya looked back at Pala. "And now, my white woman who wears the black of night, I would spare the big one for a time. His large size and coolness in the face of death may well afford me personal amusement in the long days ahead. As for this other, with your permission . . ."

Pala looked at Santos with disdain. "He is yours to do with as you wish. He has been my slave. I give him to you."

Santos sputtered, but could not speak, not at least before he saw the fate that was to be his.

Kabaya had moved to one of the arms of the larger of the two thrones. He touched a section of the arm. There was a slight *whirring* sound, and the women who served Kabaya guided the three outsiders from the section of stone flooring that seemed to be moving—*was* moving. About four feet square, it was lowering. Then the nature of the sound changed slightly as the direction of the moving stone also changed. It was now receding under the throne, leaving by degrees what would be a four foot square hole in the top of the stone structure.

"In the earliest times," Kabaya explained, "the method of ceremonial death here was unusual, but then so was the Dark Lord who ruled this place. When the mantle of rulership passed to me, I wished to retain the essence of the original method, which was the removal of blood from the victim's body. Unfortunately, the methods the Dark Lord used are not available to me, but Nature itself is ingenious. Thus—as you see—"

He reached quickly to where Santos stood, his fingers clutching at the thin man's shirtsleeve. With a sudden yank that caused a yelp from the terror-struck

Brazilian the Indian tore the bottom half of the sleeve free from the rest of the shirt. Then he dropped it into the blackness.

"Look down, and see," he commanded the three outsiders.

They saw. The sun was now high enough in the sky so that it reflected the surface of the pool of water that was some dozen and a half feet below them. There seemed to be little movement on the surface—until the piece of cloth material touched. Then things changed drastically.

It was as if someone were stirring the pool with a gigantic spoon, such were the frothy turbulence and the splashing sounds that reached their ears. But the action soon was over, the surface of the pool quiet again.

"They are quick to realize when there is nothing for them," Kabaya said. "Did you all see them clearly? Did you recognize them?"

"Yes," Pala said, her eyes seemingly delighted as they still watched the water below. "*Piranhas!*"

"Almost as effective as the old method—more effective in the sense that, after the blood is gone, there no longer is a husk to be concerned with. Shall we have my little friends demonstrate?"

"Yes—please, yes!" Pala said, like an excited child.

"Bring him to the edge," Kabaya said. His eyes rested on those of Santos.

"No—please, *please*—"

Pala's eyes flashed at him. "Do not be such a sniveling coward! You disgust me!"

"P-Pala! *Please!*"

But she was now facing Kabaya. "Please, my lord. May I do the honors? May I rid you—and myself—of this disgraceful excuse for a man, who is, to use his own

words, little more to me than excess baggage?"

Kabaya took a step backward and bowed slightly. "As you wish."

Fiercely she turned on Santos, her hands gripping his right arm, her fingernails digging into his flesh, her strength moving him toward the edge of the—

With a frantic motion, Santos pulled himself free of her grasp. His right hand shot inside his shirt and was out in the open again, one of his sharp knives flashing in the sunlight. "One step closer, Pala, and I—"

Her laugh was like the sound of a tinkling bell. Her smile was one of affection. "Santos, Santos—my dear husband. Put the knife away. Did you think I was really serious? Do you think that after all that you and I have been through together, that I would—that I—"

She shook her head slowly. "I am hurt by your thoughts, dear husband, really I am. Please—give me the knife."

Her right hand came toward him, palm upward, in a smooth, slow, and nonthreatening movement. The look in her eyes almost was tearful. She was deeply hurt, Santos could see that. Yes, he should—

"No!" he cried out suddenly, moving the knife swiftly to the side so that she could not touch it. And that was his fatal error, for that reaching hand now moved swiftly—and forcefully—the other hand joining it so that the flats of her palms thudded into his chest. Simultaneous with his scream in his own ears he heard her vicious laugh. He wanted to slice back with his knife, but he was too occupied fighting for his balance. In the very instant he knew he was not going to make it, he heard his wife's cold voice: "Goodbye, my husband—*feed the fish!*"

Then the world turned upside down, the sounds of

his screaming pounding through his ears, his eyes shrouded in darkness. He felt the wet collision with the water's surface, then the sensation of something all over his skin, as if he had suffered a sudden and severe sunburn. But it was more than that, much more terrifying.

He surfaced just once to plead for mercy. But there was no mercy from above.

Just as there was no mercy from the piranha.

Kabaya did not bother to look down. Instead he watched the face of the black-haired woman. "Yes, I think that you and I shall get along quite well. Your mind is one with a keen edge, and your cruelty is something that I—"

He stopped, his eyes looking outward toward the edge of the village. The drums, which had been quiet, had begun again. He listened intently for a while, hardly breathing. No one on the pyramid before the golden thrones moved. Finally, he spoke.

"The past returns once more," he said slowly. "In one and the same day, the Disc of Osce comes back to our village. And now, if the drums speak truly, comes she who . . ."

His voice trailed off, his right hand slowly moving to the top of his head. It was as if he were making sure that the steel helmet he wore was still in its proper place. Then he smiled. "This meeting had to take place one day. If the drums speak truly, we are ready. We are *more* than ready for her."

CHAPTER TEN

"Kaykattra! Welcome to your home among us."

The sun was beginning its descent as they entered the village. From the base of the pyramid, Harmon looked up at the massive Indian. Then he took in the remainder of those who stood on the top and along the steps fronting the structure. All of them on the face were women; from appearances they were paragons of their sex. At the top there were but three individuals. A woman who looked, from this distance, very similar to Ktara. A man who undoubtedly was the one called El Cobra. And, of course, the speaker, whom Ktara, who stood between himself and Cam, now answered.

"There have been changes since I was last here, Kabaya."

"You refer to these ornaments on our heads, I assume. Yes, that is something new I have instituted. But I see you gaze also at the golden symbol that rises behind me. That too is new since your departure. But both are old by human standards."

His voice was level, matter-of-fact. Ktara's was cold, scornful as if she were facing a brazen household servant.

"You have taken much upon yourself, Kabaya."

"I have, my lady. But these precautions are my way of welcoming you. With them perhaps we meet as equals." He smiled slightly. "There are other precautions as well—those, if used, might serve to lower your status further. Now, perhaps, you will tell me why you have chosen this time to return."

Ktara pointed a finger upward toward the woman. "She—and that one," she said, moving her finger to the big Argentine. "They have violated the laws of a civilized land. They are to be returned to it, and this village to be cleansed of them."

The third one, Cam thought. Where is the third—Santos?

Dead, Ktara's mind shot back. And not very nicely done.

Cam nodded, realizing that the white woman and her large associate up there on the pyramid had no steel guarding their thoughts. He looked at Harmon, wondering whether the old man's fingers were itching to grab that .38 clasped under the chair just as his own hand wanted nothing more than to feel the butt of his Magnum snug in his palm and its hammer cocked back.

No, Ktara warned. And she was right. From the

dozens of spears that still surrounded them, now was hardly the time to start a shooting spree. He concentrated his mind on what was happening, namely Kabaya's words—especially since the Indian was talking about Harmon and himself.

"Your fellow visitors, they seem a strange pair. One old man who cannot walk. One young giant. But then you have always liked big men, have you not? You have always preferred such servants, even as I was once to you."

Ktara's reply snapped like a whip: "He is not my servant! As for yourself, you never were a servant of mine, but of my Master!"

"Yes," Kabaya said quietly. "Your Master. I wonder if perhaps he is nearby. Not perhaps right here with us, but hiding somewhere. No, that could not be, could it? Not in the daylight hours. But . . . as I look at this muscular young man, yes, it occurs to me that a strong back such as his might serve to carry something quite heavy. A large box, perhaps. A box filled with earth—and *Dracu!*"

Kabaya barked a swift question to one of the Indians who had brought them to the village. The response was just as swift. Then the stone-faced, white-haired leader pointed to a golden rectangular building to the right of the pyramid. The Indian who had responded to Kabaya's question leaped into action, running swiftly toward the designated place.

Kabaya turned to Ktara and smiled.

"Let the rays of the sun touch *him*, and he perishes. Is that not so? And is it not so also that, even should he not be touched by the solar beams, there is another means by which—ah, yes!"

The Indian had returned from the golden rectangle.

"Yes," Kabaya said. Quickly he issued orders in his native tongue, and some dozen spear carriers moved to the pathway out of the village, the Indian who had come from the rectangular building led the pack.

"You noted, I assume, what my messenger carried—my messenger of death to Dracu?"

The three of them had noticed. Unlike most of the implements they had seen so far within the village compound, the thing that was being referred to was not made of gold. It was wood.

A thick, sharply pointed wooden stake.

Now—stop them!

Cam's response to Ktara's mental command was swift and to the point. Pivoting on his feet, he sent his right fist into the face of the nearest guard, while his left hand ripped the Indian's spear from his loosened grasp. Like a stiff whip the spear shaft cracked into the throat of a second guard, who went down gasping for breath as Cam hurled the gold-tipped weapon point first into the stomach of a third.

Run for the edge of the village! I'll protect you.

All well and good, Cam thought as he started for the trail's beginning—and it was, as he soon saw; three spears that looked to be right on target stopped much short of it due to the invisible protective wall Ktara had placed around him. Still, though, that wall could only stay in place for a given amount of time—and the village militia was racing in full force to cut him off before he got out of the place. Well, maybe he could cut his own path through.

The big Magnum was free from Cam's belt now, and he stopped for only a split second to bring up the barrel of the weapon and to fire. As he pulled the trigger, he

hoped that Ktara's protective shield was one-way only, otherwise he might find himself chewing on the copper-capped missile that roared from the big gun. But as the echo reached his ears, he saw the Indian he had aimed for crash backward, taking three of his friends down with him. He considered taking a second shot, but decided there was no need. As he charged toward the opening, half of the eyes that watched him come were staring wide at the weapon he held. Fortunately, wide, staring eyes do not make for alertness.

He hit the line like a fullback with a fourth-down mission of picking up the final three inches of turf. As he did so, two spears were deflected from the shield. And now there were shots from other guns—a pistol and another, larger weapon, probably that carbine the one called the Cobra carried. Another Indian went down from a leg wound, and Cam's right fist—still gripping the Magnum—dropped still another with a bone-cracking smash to the crown of the skull. Then he was through, with nothing other than daylight ahead of him.

Daylight—and a hell of a long run. And a few deaths along the way, preferably his own not among them.

Kabaya roared out his orders like a wounded animal. As spearmen jumped at his command and moved from the village in pursuit of the fierce-fighting outsider, the white-haired Indian's face slowly lost the flush of red anger it had evidenced and returned to its expressionless stonelike quality. His voice seemed to drip with poison:

"So, *Kaykattra*—you send your servant on a mission to oppose me. You protect him from harm, but that

protection is very temporary. The brew of death on the spears of my men will find its way into his bloodstream before too much time has passed, I assure you of that. You see, my dark woman with the green eyes, you have let us know too much of your powers and their limitations—and how those powers of yours can be reduced to nothing. Your tall servant will be very surprised when that first spear passes through what he has thought to be an impermeable wall of defense.”

The tribal leader was now enjoying his taunting of Ktara. “But I wonder why it is you did not stop my men yourself. Is it that you have decided your end is approaching, and that you wanted your young man out of the village, thinking that you thereby had placed him free from harm? It is too bad that you could not do the same for the old man—but then he cannot run as swiftly, is that not so?”

“I can protect this man as well,” Ktara said.

“Can you, now?” Do your powers stretch so well that you can shield them both? Perhaps you *can* do so, yet I believe that the strain might be a bit too much.” His eyes moved to the women on the steps beneath him. “The old man—bring him up to me.”

Ktara took a step forward, her eyes narrowing.

“Don’t do a thing,” Kabaya warned. “Look first at the number of spears raised against you and the old man. You might be able to shield both of you—for a time—but then there is that young man out in the jungle to think of. Then, too, since you have expressed your desire to keep these two alive,” he gestured toward Pala and the Cobra, “could you also protect them? The thought that comes to me is that you would not wish to see either of them dead.” Again he looked at the nude women below him. “Bring him to me.”

Four of the women began to move down, but hesitatingly so. It was obvious that they were afraid of the white woman with the cat's eyes.

"Very well," Kabaya said. "The game has gone far enough, *Kaykattra*. You have noticed my several precautions against you and your Master. One you have not noticed—but that has been awaiting only my signal since you entered the village—I think you will find most effective." He raised his left arm.

Harmon looked at Ktara, who in turn jerked her head back to look behind her. Harmon's eyes followed, but he saw nothing close by. On the edge of the jungle, however . . .

It was a lone man—a man with a short bow, an arrow notched to the bowstring. But the arrow was not of the ordinary sort. Its end was much larger than an ordinary arrowhead, and it was composed of a kind of cloth or canvas. More significant was this additional fact about the arrowhead:

It was on fire.

And now, as the *twang* of the string reached Harmon's ears, from the corners of his eyes he saw the other bowmen—five more of them, each with the same type of arrows. Their bowstrings spoke, and the flaming arrows arced upward toward their target. *Targets*, rather. For there was no human target intended for the fiery missiles. Harmon saw that as they landed. He saw it also on Ktara's face. As the arrows struck ground—in an almost perfect circle around the woman and himself—her expression was one of fear.

He himself had nothing to fear from the flaming six-pointed circle. The fire was not all that high—nor close enough to bother him. But Ktara . . .

She closed her eyes, her shoulders gave a jerking

shudder. From above them, Kabaya laughed.

"The cat-woman enjoys not the flames of fire. Dracu once told me that. He told me also of its effects on your abilities. Now you shall wait within your little circle while I prepare for the evening's entertainment. I am not only a leader but a host as well, and I wish to be gracious. *The old man—bring him here!*"

The four women who had feared even to steal a glance at Ktara looked upon her now with complete scorn as they entered the circle of fire and lifted Harmon's chair. Harmon thought of resisting but could see little in the way of gain for either Ktara or himself. She now had lowered herself to one knee, but as Harmon was moved from the circle, her eyes caught his. They were still clear. She was not done yet, Ktara wasn't. She was conserving her strength. He was sure that was the message in her eyes. No, damn it, he *wasn't* sure. If only there were no steel plate in his head, if only she could communicate with him as easily as she could with Cam. Once, it seemed long ago, he had viewed this barrier as being an advantage. She could not read his mind, she could not exercise control over it. But there had been later times when the barrier was a distinct disadvantage. Now was one of those times.

All right. For the time being, he was on his own. As his chair was carried up the stone steps of the pyramid, he again wondered exactly what he should do. There was one chance—one possibility. In the meantime, he could do little other than follow Kabaya's lead.

Harmon nodded curtly to the three on the stone plateau, then he looked around appreciatively. "The view is excellent."

"You, old man, are looking in the wrong direction," Kabaya replied. "Bring his chair over here."

Over here was a place before one of the two thrones. There was no slab of stone in that place. It was a pit of some kind. Harmon saw water below him. Also something else—some sort of bone, cleaned to a gleaming white.

"It appears," the woman in black said with a sneer, "that you are going to have the opportunity to meet my husband. My *late* husband, or what remains of him."

Kabaya's deep-set eyes seemed to pierce Harmon's. "She is referring to the fish I keep below. You are familiar with piranha?"

"I've seen them, yes," Harmon answered coolly.

"But not as closely as you will," Kabaya said.

"In that case, there is something I should do first," Harmon said levelly. He had decided that he'd better use that one chance, that one possibility, while he still had the opportunity. With a swift and deft movement, his fingers jerked the .38 from its clamp beneath the seat of the chair. Before any other hand had begun to reach for him, he had pulled the trigger twice.

As the Cobra wrested the gun from Harmon's grip, Kabaya looked down to his stomach where the bullets had struck. "My Lord Dracu gave my person certain properties when he extended my life span, so that I could more effectively oversee the guardianship of his wealth." He smiled at the woman. "Or perhaps I should now finally refer to it as *my* wealth."

"My lord Kabaya is always correct," the woman said. "This old one—he feeds the piranha now?"

"No, woman, not now. Do not be overly anxious. I wish to arrange things so that they do not happen all at once. A little suspense heightens my pleasure, I find."

From the jungle came the sounds of three gunshots. Kabaya looked at the afternoon sun.

"The young American still holds out against my men. You—you with the rifle. Find this American and, if he still lives, kill him."

As the Cobra moved down the pyramid face, Kabaya watched him. "There is one I will enjoy killing myself—with my naked hands." He looked at Harmon. "You are not a worthy foe, although the strength of your upper body appears great for one of your age. Perhaps when you were younger . . ." The Indian shrugged. "No matter. The fish shall enjoy their brief battle with you. Tonight all things are fulfilled to me. I am the victor over Dracu. I take this woman. And to celebrate these things, we shall have a great ceremonial fire. That one—*Kaykattra*—shall burn within its center. And with the last thought that passes through her head, she will know that, with her death, you die also—as a direct consequence of her loss of strength. To arrange this, to work this out perfectly, will take some thought."

He laughed. "Fortunately, we have the time. There is, however, one thing. While I prepare, it would be best if you were not totally conscious. Therefore . . ."

Harmon saw the heavy fist of the huge Indian coming. His mind raced. There was something he had to do. He knew that he could not avoid the oblivion that fist would cause. His eyes closed, his mind concentrating a finger of pure white energy applied to the tiny switch of the device implanted within his chest. *Move!* he commanded that lever. Move so that the second unit—the one that lies next to the heart of Dracula—can retract the sliver of—

But the contact came—not that of telekinetic energy force to lever. But that of Kabaya's knuckles to the side of Harmon's head.

If Harmon's eyes opened, they saw nothing but a momentary flash. Then there was nothing but blackness.

The lever remained in the position in which it had been before his effort.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cam's shot was just a little off the mark, but it was a stroke of luck for him that it was. It caught the spearman in the right shoulder, causing the weapon he was in the process of throwing to go wild. The spear struck Cam on his knee, but it was only the rear, unpoisoned end of the shaft that did so, thus it could be ignored. Or such was Cam's first thought. The second thought immediately contradicted the first.

The spear had *touched* him. The protective shield Ktara had given him was no longer in place!

He was in trouble.

He fired two more shots—his last two—then dove

off the trail and into the thickness of the jungle. He was on his feet in no time flat, moving as swiftly as possible through the dense vines and growth with combined smashing and weaving motions that had as their prime aim getting as much of that vegetation as possible between himself and the reserve of spears that had been awaiting action on the trail. After a time, he stopped and listened.

Nothing.

Nothing except the sounds of some jungle life forms whose rest he had disturbed in his violent progress. The air above him sounded out with the cries of birds and monkeys, and closer to the ground were other sounds. Just movements, however. No deadly hiss of some nearby snake ready to plunge its fangs into a lower leg. That would have been just fine—escaping a poisoned tooth of gold to step squarely into a nest of fun-filled pit vipers. He would have to be careful.

He stopped the grin that accompanied his last thought. Careful? What was there to be careful about? He had his mission to accomplish, and it was one that he'd better accomplish. He who in that Romanian crypt had been the one to take the stake from the heart of the vampire count now had the task of making sure somebody else didn't put one back in place. That sounded simple enough—except that there were a hell of a lot of somebodies out there, all with sharp, poisonous weapons. He, in turn, had a pistol—an excellent pistol, when it was loaded. Which it now was not. There were, of course, extra shells for the Magnum in the rucksack he'd carried from the boat, but that was where the rest of their baggage was—directly where he had been forced to leave the count.

Well, he was heading in that direction anyway.

He moved out, pushing his way through the foliage as fast as he could. He continued this for less than a minute when he realized the fallacy he was operating under.

He wouldn't make it in time. Not this way. He had only one chance of getting to the crate before somebody tore the lid off the thing, and even then it wouldn't be much of a chance. But if he didn't make it, the count was doomed.

And yet . . .

Was that such a bad thing? How many times had he himself wanted the being he knew as Dracula out of the picture forever? And it would be *forever* if the light of the sun touched his body. The six months' truce was over. This was a special thing, this trip down here—special because the count wanted to see to his own business, just as Harmon and Cam wanted to see to theirs. The desires of all had just happened to coincide. But afterward . . .

There was, of course, Ktara to consider. With the count's death—a real and final death—what would happen to her? Cam had no idea. All he knew was what happened when her Master received the wooden stake through his heart. She began to age like a normal human being—and continued to do so until she could find someone to remove that stake. Perhaps that would be her fate if the more permanent death of Dracula occurred—normal aging until that normal process deteriorated her so that she died as would a normal human being. Perhaps, and if that was it, then maybe Cam would not feel at all bad about consigning her to such a fate. But perhaps more would happen, perhaps she, like the count, would vanish into the air, no more than a gray and harmless spirit that would forever

haunt the upper strata of the atmosphere—or maybe the marble stones of some ancient graveyard . . .

He shook off the thought. Unpleasant to think about . . . but still . . . Why should he and Harmon risk everything they had, their very lives and possibly their souls? He had been too quick to respond to Ktara's command that he should run from the village after the man with the stake, too quick. Maybe if he had stayed, he and Harmon could have figured a way to get the best of old White Hair. In any case, his quarrel wasn't with Kabaya or anybody who was a native of the village. It was with the big man, the Cobra, and the girl Pala. Maybe, if he dropped his involvement with the count right now—*right now*—and quietly went back to the village . . .

No. Like it or not, and he did not, he was involved with them, the count and Ktara. Like it or not, he owed his life to her. Besides, he told himself, there was little in the way of guarantee that he could spring Harmon from the village and get them both safely out of this place—along with the captives they had come for—all by himself.

So he had to take his chances.

And the chances had to be where he could make the best time—namely, out on the trail.

His jaws clenched, he moved back the way he had come. Quietly, slowly, cautiously. It seemed hours before he reached the edge of the thick growth. The trail looked clear as far as he could see in either direction, but that didn't make sense. Not until he thought about it a little. Sure. Why should they bother hunting him in the jungle? Sooner or later he would have to emerge—either at the village or at the end of the trail where the boats were. And if he didn't emerge sooner

or later, that would simply mean that he had died somewhere among the snakes and monkeys. Why bother to look for a dead man—or a man who would be dead anyway, the next time he was spotted?

He was about to step out onto the pathway, when he pulled himself back into the cover of the green plant life. Someone was coming, footfalls moving with haste from the direction of the village. Three pairs of feet, by the sound of them.

A tight grin came over his face when he saw that he was right, and he saw that he had done precisely the right thing. The two Indians carried their omnipresent spears, it was true, but the other one, the one who walked between them, he carried something else.

The Cobra had that very effective-looking carbine with him. Cam let them pass, then he moved. Three fast strides, then a scream—then his feet left the ground.

The sole of his left boot caught one fear-frozen Indian in the small of the back, while his right sole drove heavily into the rear of the Cobra's skull. All three went down, the Cobra's fall shoving the Indian to his right head first into the tangling vines. But the Cobra was fast, rolling and snapping up his carbine in one fluid motion—but not before the tip of Cam's right boot crescent-kicked the weapon from the big man's hands. Not bothering to watch where the rifle landed, Cam immediately pivoted to pick up the spear that the Indian whose back he had kicked in had dropped. The owner, Cam saw at a glance, wouldn't be needing it any longer. However, the *other* Indian . . .

He already was fishing around for his own spear. Instead, he took Cam's—right through the left lung.

"I will kill you, senor!" the Cobra laughed. He sprang to his feet.

But Cam's spring was faster. In reality, it was more of a dive. It ended in a roll, but when he came up, poised on his left knee, he had the carbine in his hands. He pointed the weapon directly at the Cobra's gut.

"Perhaps I will kill *you*—Senor?" he said through his teeth.

"*You!*" the Cobra cried. "You were the one on the roof. In New York!"

Cam rose, careful not to give the other man the opening he knew he was looking for. "I think I owe you something for that—perhaps death?" He *clacked* back the carbine's action.

"Senor . . ." The voice sounded almost pleading enough to be believed.

"Turn around."

"You would shoot me in the back?"

"If you don't turn around, you get it in the groin—for the full clip."

The Cobra turned around, his hands high. "Senor, it was the woman—she made me do those things. I did not wish to—"

But that's as far as he got before the butt of the carbine slammed into the side of his head. His knees buckled and he dropped down. Cam checked to be sure the big man was still alive. He was. Out like a light, but still breathing. "You're lucky I need you, pal. So do me a favor and wait here like a good boy, okay?"

The Cobra, of course, said nothing, but he gave every outward indication that he would remain exactly where he was.

Cam ran. The carbine reloaded with one of the three full clips he had found in the Cobra's pockets, it was

ready for business. The trail was darkening, which was a good sign, except that he knew that the Indian with the stake was far ahead of him. Too far ahead, too close to the objective. The sun would still be sending its rays earthward when the Indian came to that crate. It wouldn't be easy to open, but once it was . . .

The Indian who was central to Cam's thoughts was, at that very moment, very solemn. He stood clutching the wooden stake in his hands, as three of his companions worked at pulling the top from the wooden crate. Six other men of the tribe stood by, their spears upright in their fists, their faces as serious as death. All of them understood what they might find in that wooden box. All of them had heard the legends.

Dracu!

There were many versions of the stories. Kabaya said that Dracu was an evil being—a devil from another world, who had tried to enslave the tribe long ago, but who had failed because he—Kabaya—had withstood successfully the Black Lord's powers. But other versions said that it was only after the Black Lord and his cat-woman departed that Kabaya began telling *his* version. Yet, there was no doubt that Kabaya had strange and magical powers. Did he not remain alive for all these many many lifetimes? That was not open to question. Everybody knew. Everybody who was alive today in the village remembered their grandfathers telling them of Kabaya's agelessness when *they* were but children. But here, now—in that crate—

Dracu!

He, Dracu, could be killed in only one of two ways. So went the stories. A stake in the heart, plunged in by strong hands, if the death was to be effected during the hours of the moon. But, by daylight, all that had to be

done was to expose the body to the beams of the sun. So simple, so very simple, yet . . .

Why did the men not hurry?

He asked the question aloud to the three who were attending the crate. "The sun is not any longer high in the sky," he reminded them, his voice shaking as he did so.

"The wood does not yield," one of the men, as young as the stake-bearer, complained. As if to demonstrate the point, the young Indian slashed furiously at the wood with a thick knife.

"It must yield," said the Indian with the stake. "It must yield soon. I, Mochtay, say it must."

The Indian with the knife smirked. "Then you—Mochtay—you give your hand to it! Ours do not seem good enough for the job."

Mochtay strode to the crate. There was anger within him, so much anger. He, Mochtay, was to accomplish something this day that would cause songs to be sung of him for generations to come. Mochtay—the killer of Dracu. The slayer of the Black Lord. No, he would not tolerate another's destroying those future songs. His anger, which had been directed initially at his mocking companion, released itself on the wooden top of the crate. Sliding the stake into his breechclout, he reached down with hands of power, hands of determination. And pulled.

The top came free.

"Another box!" the Indian with the knife said tauntingly.

"Move back!" Mochtay commanded. Without waiting to see if his order had been obeyed, he pulled at the second cover. He almost fell backward as this one held no nails of any kind. Inside was—he squinted in the

darkness to be sure . . .

Darkness?

Darkness! The sun . . .

The sun was gone. It no longer . . .

Dracu!

A black costume but somehow finer than the normal clothing, at least when judged by what those others who had come into the village this day wore. But it was not the costume that made the major impression on the young warrior with the stake. It was the size of the man—as large or larger than Kabaya! And the whiteness of his face! It was as if the sun never touched that brow.

The sun. Of course the sun never touched him. And today's sun was gone. That meant that there was but one way to . . .

Mochtay gripped the stake firmly. It had been his intention to jam downward with the sharpened weapon, but now as he looked at that huge chest he was not sure. He might not be able, even with his strength, to crash through flesh and bone and reach the heart. And that is precisely what he had to do, if any of the stories told of Dracu were correct, and he believed they were in that respect. He would require help. He looked at the group of men who stood staring wide-eyed into the box and the man who lay upon the dark earth inside. Whom would he select? Whom should he choose to share the honor of the campfire songs, the warrior who assisted Mochtay in his destruction of the Evil One?

“Chako—take this stake.”

The boy whose name he called—Chako was yet to turn his fourteenth year—hesitated at taking the piece of wood extended to him. The youth looked frightened, yet so did the others. But, more important to Mochtay

was the fact of the boy's youth itself. He was not yet of that age when men become boastful. He would not play up his part in this event—to the young girls, yes, he would brag, but he would not dare to do so around the fires of the men. And by the time he felt able enough or daring enough to do so, the songs would have been made, they would have been sung for many months, and they would have the official blessing of Kabaya. Then it would be too late for him to argue that things were otherwise than the way they were reported in tribal song.

“Take the stake, Chako.”

There was no sound in the jungle, no one dared to breathe. Chako turned pale, then his hand shot out. As his fingers surrounded the piece of sharpened wood, they trembled, almost causing him to drop it to the interior of the crate. But when his other hand secured it, he nodded nervously to Mochtay.

Mochtay nodded back, his expression grim. Correctly so, he decided, because even now he was composing the lines of what would live in history as the ballad of his great achievement. *The stern-faced Mochtay, the warrior proud . . .*

Again Mochtay nodded, then he looked around him, searching for a rock of the proper size. *A stone of death with which to send the sharpened wood heartward.*

He smiled, his eyes falling on the tool that would assist in making his fame. It was a flat rock, light gray in color. And as his hands gripped it, it had the right feeling. Heavy, but not too heavy. Thick, but not too thick for an effective grip. He looked at the rock as he brought it up to his chest. Not an ordinary rock, this, but one that would have a place of honor in his hut and, in the years to come, the huts of his family line.

The Rock of Dracu, it would be called. No, that wasn't right. Yes, the Rock of Mochtay. Much better.

He hefted the mighty Rock of Mochtay and walked somberly back to the crate.

"You will hold the stake upright and firmly. Place the point here," he instructed the boy, showing him precisely where he wanted the end of the stake, but careful so as not to touch the sleeping Dracu. Sleeping . . . that is how the Dark Lord looked. Even the smile on those red lips suggested a man at rest, a man dreaming. Dreaming of evil things, no doubt—perhaps of death itself. "Here," he repeated to Chako.

The boy did as he was directed, a shudder visibly going through his body at the touch of the pointed end of the stake to the breast of Dracu. It was as if a sudden chill had come from the deepest depths of the jungle.

"Firmly!" Mochtay commanded. "Hold it firmly—straight up."

Chako obeyed, his eyes following the slow upward rise of the gray stone. When the stone stopped, his eyes closed. *Excellent*, thought Mochtay. *If he dares to speak against me, we shall remember the eyes that closed from cowardice and fear.*

He brought the stone down. With the fullness of his strength he brought it down. There was the sound of something cracking, something like the shell of a great turtle, then there was a spurt of blood, warm blood that covered the hands that held the Rock of Mochtay as well as those younger hands that still gripped the stake.

It was over. Mochtay looked hard at the still strangely smiling face of Dracu to be sure it was over. Then he laughed.

"Dracu is dead. I, Mochtay, am his destroyer. The Black Lord is dead. In the songs, this will be said.

Mochtay did slay Dracu—*forever!*”

But . . .

Even as he said the words, he wondered. It was over, but too easily. Too easily. From the legends, he would have thought that—well, there should have been something more. Perhaps he expected the body through which he had driven his stake to react—to sit up, to scream—before it accepted death.

What Mochtay did not, could not, know was that he whom he called Dracu might well have done so. He in fact had done so on previous occasions when the wooden stake had been driven into his heart. But this time there was a difference, a very big difference.

There already was a piece of wood that pierced his heart. A tiny sliver of wood, to be sure, but, to be sure, a sliver of wood that was most effective. Where there was one, there now were two. And removal of one would make no difference.

Not unless the other one was removed as well.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You understand the situation? I want you to understand all of it. That is why I waited until you were fully conscious before bringing you closer to your fate.”

Harmon, frankly, did not fully understand the leader of the tribe. He was still in his wheelchair, but his body was tightly bound by a thick hemp rope. As his head cleared, he realized that his hands were free. He also realized that the darkness within his skull was going to stay that way, in part. He realized that night had fallen on the jungle village. Another indication of the same fact was the huge fire that had been built near the base of the pyramid, a fire that . . .

He shook his head to clear up the double-image sight. It cleared, and he saw what he suspected he had seen. The fire was built in a ring shape. In the center of the ring was—*Ktara!*

"She weakens," Kabaya observed. "She has much power, this woman who is both cat and woman, but gradually the fire will take it from her. You understand this about the one who called herself *Kaykattra?*"

"I hear you," Harmon said. He understood, only too well.

"Then hear this also. You will notice that the rope that binds you is quite long. It not only firmly holds your body, but the end of it runs down the complete side of this building to a point . . . there, do you see the three stakes placed between us and the fire?"

Harmon saw. He said nothing, but he didn't have to.

"You will notice that each of those stakes bears several turnings of the rope. If the closest stake were to be cut, what do you think would happen?"

This Harmon did not understand. Not until the woman—Pala—interpreted:

"You will not be where you are now. You remember the hole, and the water—and the fish?"

And then Harmon knew. Still, in this game of gambling against time—it was, after all, dark now, wasn't it, and didn't that mean that possibly . . .

"I'm not sure I follow you," he said.

Kabaya laughed. "Let us then change your perspective a bit." The edge of his foot shot out like a bullet. It struck the chair so that it crashed to the surface of the stone—but Harmon was not in the chair when it hit. He felt himself falling. Down, down into the blackness. His arms flailed—then stopped as his entire body felt the pain of his stopping motion.

He was in the hole, above the water. Less than five feet above the level of the water—and *the piranhas that waited beneath its surface.*

“Now do you understand?” Kabaya’s voice echoed down. “Do you have the imagination necessary to picture what will happen when the first stake is slashed? Do you understand that the rope, which previously was wound around that stake, will straighten? Do you know what happens then?”

Harmon knew. Whatever the length of that portion of rope, he would be that much closer to the fish. His legs would be, that is—the legs that he could not move to save his life!

“You know,” Kabaya said. “You know full well. Then, know this also. You recall that there are three such stakes. When the first is slashed, your feet will just about touch the water. When the second is cut, you will be immersed up to your knees. When the third and final one goes—because the rope is wrapped many times around its shaft—your body will be in the water up to your throat. I trust you will appreciate this final subtlety that was not my idea but that of my bride-to-be. She told me that I should not take the chance of your dying by drowning. She convinced me that it would be far better for your mind to register even the last bit of agonizing life that time allows you. What do you think of my wife-to-be?”

Several words suggested themselves to Harmon. He used none of them. The fact was appreciated by Kabaya.

“Well said—or *not* said. But I have not told you *when* the stakes will be cut, have I? No, I have not. You tell time by the conventional method of minutes, but I think for this night there shall be a different

method. My bride-to-be is anxious for me to claim her. Thus I shall—upon this very structure. I shall claim her three times, old man, and each time—when I have spent myself—a stake shall be slashed. Thus, you see, the skill of my woman in pleasing me also shall determine the span of life you have left to yourself.”

It was the woman’s laugh that now echoed inside the pyramid. But it was Kabaya whose voice next communicated:

“Of course, there is another factor, and that is the woman-cat. She has the mind-power to move things—or to hold them from moving. Thus, she can assist you, she can keep the rope from running out fully. She will be made to understand all this, in the event she does not already. However, I would not rely too much on her powers. The fire, you see . . .”

Harmon cursed under his breath. Kabaya laughed again.

“Then, too, there is the strength of your own arms—considerable strength, as I have had occasion to mention. So much strength that I thought it right to give you the chance to employ it—for as long as you can. That is why they are free. Try, if you will, to climb above the water. Try. You will not be hampered in your attempt unless you climb too close to the top. Then, I am afraid, I shall have to employ a sharp spear to make your strong hands release their bond.” Kabaya stopped, as if waiting for Harmon to comment. Since Harmon did not, and since Kabaya knew that he would not, he picked up the conversational ball:

“I would very much like, old man, to know who you are. I would like to know why you are here. The cat-woman said it was your search for the other three out-

siders that brought you to this place. I accept that. But there is something more. There is a relationship between you and the Dark One of which I am ignorant. I would like to know what that relationship is. You are important to her—*Kaykattra*—in a way that I was not. Your young friend, the strong, no-haired one, he also is important to her. Why? I wish to know the answer.”

Harmon’s laugh surprised himself. “You really want to know, you pull me out of here and maybe I’ll tell you!”

Kabaya’s voice thudded downward as if it were made of lead. “You are dead, old man. The trouble is you do not yet know it!”

Pala’s voice followed. “He has been a long time living, my lord. Let him have a long time dying.”

“A long time?” Kabaya asked. “Are you that insecure regarding your ability to please?”

Pala’s laugh struck Harmon like one of the Indian’s poisoned spears. “Go—tell this cat-woman, or whatever she claims to be, what is expected of her. Then I will illustrate to you a simple truth. What will be a very short time for one such as you—one who is enwrapped in pleasure—can be a very long time for one such as him. For one who is about to die in horror.”

Ktara needed no words of Kabaya to understand. As weak as the fire had made her, her mind was open to the thoughts of Pala, who wore no protective helmet of steel. For the past two hours, Ktara had considered causing the woman whom she hated to throw herself down into the piranha pit. She could have done it. She could do it now. But Pala was needed. Back in New York City—of all unlikely and now remote places—Pala was needed. To speak. To clear Cameron

Sanchez of the murder charges against him. That was important. There had been three, originally, who could so testify. One was now dead. The second man—the Cobra—was out in the jungle hunting Cam. He might wind up the hunted rather than the hunter. Mr. Sanchez was very good at killing, Ktara knew that well from past experience. If, then, the Cobra died, there was only the ice-souled Pala. No, Ktara would not kill this woman. Not yet, anyway. It might prove necessary as this night wore on, but right now . . .

Right now Kabaya was halfway down the steps. Pala was unclothing herself for the ritual that was about to begin. Her bare breasts shone in the firelight as she stood under that great golden cross toward which three other naked girls now moved, ascending the steps of the pyramid in order to—

Yes! Suddenly Ktara knew why they were climbing the face of the stone. And she suddenly realized that she had to concentrate her powers—those that she still had. Her eyes narrowed swiftly, the yellow-green of their color changing to a flashing white. And suddenly—

The girls who had just reached the top of the platform screamed. Nothing touched them, but they couldn't believe their eyes. They had come to take from the arms of the great cross the chains carrying the smaller crosses. It was time—past time, in fact—for them to be distributed. But now—

Now they were moving!

All by themselves, they were moving through the air—off the cross arms and toward the center of the stone top, past the golden thrones and . . .

And directly over the square hole where the old man was hanging suspended.

Then they dropped from sight, the splashing of the water below removing all doubts of their final disposition.

Kabaya's face was one of rage when he reached a place before her on the other side of the flames.

"You misuse what little power remains to you," he said. "When the signals are given, one by one, and the stakes that hold the rope are cut, you will wish you had preserved that power, rather than wasted it as you have. The little crosses are not essential to those of us within the village. We still have our huge protector—as you can see. And that one you shall not destroy, not from here—and do you know why? Try to move it, to break it into pieces, and you will learn that it cannot be done. It is not made of solid gold, *Kaykattra*, but inside that brilliant exterior are beams of steel!"

His mouth turned into a vile sneer. "In any case, there is no longer a need for that symbol. Dracu will not be coming here under his own power. Dracu is dead—forever!"

Ktara's voice spat out as if it carried a curse of damnation:

"It has been night for some time. If your men reached my Master before darkness came, a runner surely would have reached here by now. No, Kabaya, the death of Dracu has not been accomplished. He will be coming, that I promise you. And I vow—"

But she stopped, because her eyes were drawn to the edge of the trail that led into the village. The runner she had spoken of had appeared, as if her very words had summoned him. The young man did not slow down until he approached Kabaya. The exchange was swift. When it was over, Kabaya's face grinned toward the flames.

"You are right, *Kaykattra*. But so am I. Dracu was not reached before the sun was extinguished, and he now approaches our village. But he does not do so under his own power. He is being borne by the very men who plunged the stake of death into his heart! He will remain here with us for the remainder of the night—out here under the dark sky. Then, when the light of the morning comes . . ."

Kabaya did not finish the statement. There was no need to. But he felt a need for something else, a command to the tribesmen who stood around him.

"She maintains too much of her strength. Build the fire higher—*so high that it will make her melt!*"

He turned and looked at the stakes around which the rope was entwined. "Perhaps this way is *too* slow," he said, turning back to Ktara. Then, with a mighty sweep of his right foot, he kicked the stake nearest the pyramid.

It tore free from its hold on the ground.

The rope bit into Harmon's chest as the sudden downward descent ended in a just-as-sudden jerk. He had hoped for more time, had counted on it. Surely, Kabaya and the girl could not yet have consummated their first union of flesh above him—not yet. But, just as surely, he knew the reason for the first stake being removed or slashed or whatever. The significance of the golden crosses and chains that had dropped from above was not lost on him. Ktara had acted, and Kabaya had acted—probably in retaliation.

He looked down.

His shoes were close, very close, to the surface of the water. Under that surface . . . well, he knew that they were there. The piranhas were no bluff. Imaginary fish

did not scurry about and create the stir that occurred just moments earlier when the gold had been dumped into the pool. No, they were there, all right. There and waiting. He could almost feel their tiny eyes upon him now, bugged out with anticipation. Their victim above them and—in time—*with* them.

His hands gripped the rope above his head firmly. His arm and shoulder muscles were relaxed, even though a bit of upward pulling would relieve the tension of the hemp around his chest. But it was better, now, to suffer that inconvenient pain than to play out his muscle power. He would need it later, and those arm and shoulder muscles would have to be ready instantly. The instant that second stake went he'd have to begin climbing. For life and limb.

"Old man!"

Harmon's eyes narrowed when they took in Kabaya's form.

"It starts now, old man. That first stake was just for practice—your practice in falling. Now comes the real thing. Now comes the union of myself and my bride. Are you ready?"

It put a strain on Harmon to answer, but he couldn't let it pass. "Ask the woman—she's the one you're uniting with!"

Kabaya laughed. "I'll say this for you, old man. You face death with humor."

Harmon scowled. Maybe we'll all have a good laugh, he thought to himself. You've got me, you've got Ktara. But you haven't got Cam, and maybe you haven't got the count.

And as the face of Kabaya moved from the opening above, as Harmon heard the soft voice of Pala beckoning to her love-to-be, he assured himself that he—Har-

mon—had done everything that *he* could do. But he was wrong.

Wrong because he had the idea in his mind that he had been successful in mentally removing the splinter from the vampire's heart. Wrong.

Maybe *dead* wrong.

Laughter. More than one man, but one man leading the triumphant sound.

Cam had let a lone runner past him not more than a few minutes ago, hiding off the trail. There had been no reason to give himself away by a shot or scream that would signal his location to the ears of the dark forest. But now he crouched low in the center of the trail. The laughing was but a short distance away, not far from where he was—probably only twenty yards from the bend in the trail that made it impossible to see them coming.

Several men, judging not only by the voices, but also by the footfalls that now reached his ears. But the triumph, what to make of that? It sounded like . . .

Like a group of men returning home.

Like a group of men who had completed their mission.

Which meant—

Cam's facial tendons tightened. All right. The opposition had won a round. But he didn't have this carbine in his hands for nothing. If it was going to be left to him to make things right, he would do what he could. He would do his damndest!

They were laughing still as they came around the bend.

They stopped laughing fast—especially the first four

of them who instantly died from the lead that poured from Cam's weapon. A fifth, holding his face where a bullet had torn through his cheeks, screamed—but it was a scream of defiance. Cam could not understand the words the young man hurled at him, could make nothing of them, but as for the man who ran toward him, the shrieking words were clear—and potent:

“No! I am Mochtay, slayer of the mighty! You dare not—”

But that was as far as he got before a second burst from Cam's carbine cut him almost in two parts at the waist.

“No!” cried Chako, he who had held the stake. But the echo of his own protest had not yet reached his ear before lead slammed into his forehead.

Cam's weapon spoke death in all directions, but under the moon that shone dimly through the heavy clouds there were other sources of death. One was unleashed. A spear, tipped in gold and dipped in a deadly poison, was launched. The man who threw it didn't see it land—Cam's carbine dropped him in his own blood. But it did land.

With his left hand Cam pulled the thing from his right calf. Part of the gristle of his leg came with it. But as he threw the weapon to the dirt of the trail, his own weapon still chattered. Then it stopped. There were no longer any targets.

He stepped forward—forward toward the crate that had been carried to the village. It was not until he was two paces from the thing that the pain hit his leg. It nearly dropped him. The throbbing . . .

Cam cursed to himself. The poison . . .

But . . .

He thrust his body downward to the crate. The face of the count was one of deep sleep. The sleep of death. The stake . . .

It took an effort, but Cam's hands grasped it. The effort was not one that was physical. The poison had not reached his arms or his brain yet. In fact, only his lower right leg felt anything strange at all. It was strictly a psychological thing. For it was a *deja vu* action. Once, months ago, it had been those same hands that had grasped a wooden stake. Grasped it and pulled it from the same body. It had caused almost more wear and tear on Cam Sanchez's inner being than he'd thought he could take, but he had done it. And now—now that he was faced with it again . . .

Better to let him stay this way? Better to let him lie here until the night waned and the sun . . .

His lower leg throbbed. Death throbbed in his system. Unless some miracle occurred . . .

Miracle? Back when he was a boy, when his old grandmother, his old *abuela*, would speak to him, she would speak of miracles. "*They are of Heaven,*" she would say. "*Ask for a miracle and perhaps Heaven, she might grant you one. But then perhaps she might not. So it is best not to ask so much, and then you don't get the refusal.*"

Ask? Ask *who*? And for what—his life? Cam's right hand released the wooden stake and his fingers groped inside his shirt. The silver cross, the cross of the religion in which he had been raised. *God . . .*

God.

A personage of whom his now-at-rest grandmother had often spoken, in whom the young Cameron Sanchez reverently believed. God. Heaven. The Correct Thing.

You cannot serve God and Mammon too. The Bible. You cannot serve Heaven and Earth with the same hand. His grandmother.

But again the leg throbbed.

Cam's thoughts raced. The choice was dramatically before him, and he knew it. The very hand that now clutched the symbol of his religion was needed if he were to bring to life the being for which that same symbol was nemesis. Yet only that being—only the count—could conceivably bring events about that might save the life of one Cameron Sanchez.

It is better to lose everything you have than to lose your soul. Bible, plus a little interpretation from the old *abuela*. But that one word, that single word:

Everything.

Himself? His life? That was only a part of it. There was Harmon, and there was Ktara. If he did not act, and act quickly . . .

But perhaps it already was too late. Then what? Suppose Harmon was already dead? What then would you be loosing upon the world?

No. There was a fail-safe in the mechanism, the one that connected the implants in Harmon's body and in that of Dracula. If Harmon was dead, then the vampire could not be restored to life.

Simple, then. *Remove the stake!*

With hands that trembled, one of them having just removed itself from the silver cross that dangled from its chain under his shirt, Cam obeyed his mind. His two hands clasped the wooden implement that had been smashed into the heart of the Dark One. Clasped and lifted.

There was a sound that resembled somebody sucking the last bit of soda through a straw. But there was

nothing else. Nothing.

Count Dracula did not move a millimeter. Nothing.

"No," Cam said through his teeth. "You can't be dead—not *really* dead! Get up, damn you—*get up!*"

The voice behind Cam was menacing:

"No, señor—you get up!"

Cam whirled around, leaping to his unsteady feet as he did—unsteady foot, rather. His right leg, it seemed almost useless.

"El Cobra has come to claim his prize, señor. That prize is yourself."

Cam's eyes flickered toward the carbine. It lay on the ground where he had left it—halfway between both men. The Cobra could reach it faster, Cam knew. He also knew that he suffered a slight disadvantage.

The Cobra carried a very sharp-looking knife.

"You have caused much death here tonight, *mi amigo*," the Cobra said. "And now it becomes your turn to die."

"No, it is your turn."

Cam's head snapped to the wooden crate, as did the Cobra's.

"Your turn," Count Dracula repeated, stepping from the coffin. "Your turn to die."

"No," Cam said. "He is not to die. I need him—alive."

Count Dracula laughed. "*You* need? You are infected with poison, Mr. Sanchez. You are going to die from that poison, that is my guess. But this one challenges me—do you not?"

The Cobra lifted his knife toward the man who spoke to him, the man who had come from the wooden crate.

Dracula smiled at Cam. "You see? He challenges me. Not you—*me!* Thus I will take him. I will take him now."

He stepped toward the big man with the knife.

"*No!*" Cam cried, stumbling forward. "*No!*"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Ahhhhhhh!”

Damien Harmon had heard the woman's voice, her sound of release. Faked, probably. Yes, but the faked sound of ecstasy no doubt was timed to coincide with the culmination of her lover's effort—Harmon did not doubt that in the least. Nor did he doubt that it was time for him to use those arm and shoulder muscles that he'd been holding in reserve.

Slowly he moved himself upward, hand over hand, right over left, left over right. Slowly and surely he moved, even as he heard the feet of Kabaya approach the space above him.

“It comes now, old man. I give the signal *now*.”

The signal itself must have been a movement, probably a hand or arm gesture. All Harmon knew was that he heard nothing unusual, and he was not about to waste precious seconds looking at the white-haired Indian. But there was something unusual. What seemed an eternity passed after Kabaya's warning. And nothing had happened. No sudden drop of Harmon's body, not as before. Then . . .

Then he felt himself moving, but by slow degrees. Not fast, and not far. He continued to climb.

"That is far enough," Kabaya said. "I do not mind your straining your fiber against what will be your certain fate, but should you come too close to the surface, I shall shorten even your limited life span with a slash of my knife. I think, yes, that you have gone far enough."

The rope moved, Harmon moving it. Again slowly and not very far.

Kabaya laughed. "She tries very hard, your friend who is surrounded by the flames. Such a simple trick for her powerful mind—or normally it would be. Ah, but now I must leave you for a while. I wish to toast my bride with a goblet full of a special brew we make here in our village. It is an excellent drink, one I rather think you would enjoy. I am sorry that, under the circumstances, I shall not be offering you a sample. She and I, we shall drink to each other. Then we shall resume our former activity. This drink of which I speak, it serves to heighten sensual experiences. I fear that it may contribute to an even earlier demise for yourself. I shall speak to you again, old man—just prior to the slashing of the third stake. When that one goes—so goes the meal to the fish."

The sound of Kabaya's bare soles on the stone

reached Harmon's ears. Then the rope began to inch downward again. If only he knew how much slack Ktara was attempting to hold back! He could climb to the right height then, even though Kabaya had warned him about moving up any further. Kabaya would be occupied with other matters now—yes, he could hear the light provocative laughter of the woman.

They would drink, then . . .

And it was very possible that he might die. It almost looked probable. No, that was negative thinking, and that was no way to die. To accept death when it became inevitable, that was one thing. But to *submit willingly* to its untimely and unwelcome intrusion, that was quite another. He had lived a long life, a good life—a long, good run, as he'd reflected earlier in the day—but to die, to die *now* . . .

That was something he would not accept, not unless he had no choice but to accept it. And if he had no choice . . .

If he died, Dracula died with him. The implants in them both had been constructed that way. It had been done as a protection for Harmon himself. Should the count attempt to get the upper hand by slaying the professor, it would be to no avail. Once Harmon's heart ceased beating, the sliver within the metal shell that lay under the vampire's heart would thrust into its target—where it would remain.

If Harmon died, Dracula died.

The rope moved downward. For a longer distance this time, and faster. Ktara was losing her mental hold.

Damn it. If Harmon died . . .

But maybe . . .

The mechanism had not been designed that way, but just maybe . . .

Maybe he could jam it. Jam the thing so that, if he should die, the sympathetic movement in the other unit would not take place. But . . .

Would he dare?

To loose upon the world a fiend such as Dracula was, a Dracula unfettered, unrestrained, with no counterbalancing power . . .

And yet . . .

Even as part of his mind was dismissing the idea, another part was investigating the possibility, involuntarily probing around the small implant to see . . .

And then it—Harmon himself—saw.

The lever was not where it should be!

He had *not* moved it before he was knocked unconscious. All this time—*damn!* He himself had kept the count useless. He himself—

But this was no time to castigate himself. He might not be able to accomplish anything at this late hour, but he had to try. He closed his eyes.

And the searing white beam of mental energy did its job. The lever moved.

And in the depths of the jungle, Count Dracula rose from the dark soil that lined the bottom of his casket.

"No!" Cam repeated. *"You cannot have him!"*

He stumbled forward, toward the carbine, but in the suddenly foggy vision that was all his eyes could send to his mind he saw that someone had beat him to it.

The Cobra.

"So, senors. It seems that you have miscalculated as to who kills who. It looks very much as if I am the one who makes little holes in you both."

Dracula smiled. "You are most welcome to try. May

I suggest that you first take this one out of his misery? Already he falls victim to the poison that will sever his soul from his body—unless you do him the favor of hastening his end in a less painful manner.”

“Thanks a lot,” Cam said, wincing from the pain behind his eyes.

“Do not mention small favors, *senor*,” Dracula mocked. To the Cobra he said, “I believe my friend is ready for your humane service.”

The Cobra grinned. “Him? Why should I bother? Like you say, *amigo*, he is a dead man already. But you—”

The carbine snapped off three rapid shots. And for the second time within that day, the Cobra stared wide-eyed at bullet holes that accomplished nothing. There was, yes, other blood on the front of the white shirt the black-haired man wore, but these new holes—*nothing!*

Count Dracula observed the damage, then looked toward the Cobra. “You are not all that effective in dealing out death—*amigo!* Shall I show you how it is done?”

The weapon clattered to the dirt. “I—I—don’t come any closer! I give myself up!”

“*Do* you? I find that amusing. And seeing that I find it amusing, I wonder why *you* do not also find it amusing. I wonder why you do not laugh at your own joke, El Cobra!”

The Cobra tried to laugh, but found he couldn’t. There was nothing at all funny about this man who did not die when three bullets tore through his middle, nothing at all funny! But . . .

The man was a man, was he not? And even that white-haired Kabaya whom Pala seemed taken with, he was a man of flesh and bone. So maybe they could

stand up to bullets, but what about strength of muscle? What about that?

The Cobra roared out an oath—and charged.

It happened fast, very fast—too fast for Cam's blurred vision to follow, too fast for even the Cobra to be fully aware of what was happening to him. At one point he was closing in on his target, both of his thick hands ready to deal out their death as needed—*instantly*. Then—*instantly*—the man he was attacking made a sudden movement. The Cobra found no target before him. Worse, there was a sudden and heavy pressure between his shoulder blades. Then . . .

He was eating dirt, his nose and a good part of his face bloodied from the abrasive contact with the trail.

He leapt to his feet.

"More in the way of battle?" the unruffled man in evening dress asked. "Is that what you desire before you die?" But the man did not wait for an answer. "I must beg your pardon, but I cannot entertain you any longer. I feel that my presence is required elsewhere. So you, on your part, will cooperate with me. The blood that is about your face . . ."

"B-Blood?" the Cobra repeated.

"Blood, yes. It has a certain fascination. It has been a while since I've nourished myself properly. Come forward. Come forward like an obedient little Cobra—and offer me your throat."

"*Throat?* Listen, *amigo*, you have got to be crazy or something. I—"

"Yes?" The eyes of the suave man flashed. The Cobra hadn't noticed before, but they were red. Blood red. "You were saying?"

"I—"

"Yes?"

"I . . ."

The Cobra stepped forward. He did not want to do so, but he did. He *did!* It was like—well, like in New York when Pala got that young student to go out the window. But he, El Cobra, never thought that he himself could . . .

"You may stop now."

The Cobra did as suggested. Another step and he would have bumped up against the man. That he did not want to do. But that wasn't right—he wanted in fact to do more than merely bump him, he wanted to kill him! Yet, now, somehow, he did not want any part of his body to *touch* that of the other.

"Are you ready to die, Cobra?" Along with the question came the suggested answer, not from the man's mouth but from his red eyes.

"Yes, Master," the Cobra said. *Yes?* His mind screamed *no!* But his mind somehow hadn't controlled the reply. He tried again:

"Yes, Master!"

"Very good. You are learning manners. Now, gaze upon my face. It will be one of the last things you will see."

His face? But he'd seen his face. He knew almost every . . .

And then the face began to change. The look of amusement was slowly vanishing. Taking its place was a look of ferocity—animal ferocity. The neatly combed-back hair was thickening. The red eyes were narrowing, the brows above them growing closer together. And that smile—it no longer was a smile. The lips had thickened, had pulled back, so that the teeth behind them were clearly revealed. Except they

no longer were simply teeth. They were fangs. The eye-teeth especially, they . . .”

“Your eyes show your point of focus,” the man-animal said thickly. “But I would expect that one who calls himself El Cobra would not be awed by such instruments.” The guttural laughter of the beast roared in the Cobra’s head. “But do not be afraid. Unlike the fangs of the deadly snake, these that you see shall put nothing into your system. No, but they shall *extract*—”

And then the big man felt himself being lifted—*lifted!*—upward. His feet dangled above the ground. And then, as he tried to move his arms and found he couldn’t, *couldn’t* fight off this monster, he no longer could see the face that really he did not want to see. He almost breathed a sigh of relief when it happened.

Something—things, there were two of them—entered his throat.

He wanted to scream, but couldn’t. He knew that something was happening to him, something very *final*. He knew that in his brain, and the rest of his body was telling him the same thing. It began with the white hot feeling at the two points in his throat, then after a time it came from his toes, his feet, his ankles. Cold, extreme cold, as if those parts of his body no longer belonged to him, no longer were there. Feet, ankles, shins—

No! No!

“No!” From somewhere came a voice echoing the very thought he could not express himself. It was that other one, the one who was dying from the poison. He was for some reason on the same side now as the Cobra, and the Cobra wished that the other one somehow could convince this—

This—*vampire!*

The Cobra's mind shrieked. For now he knew—he *knew!* The loss of feeling, which now was progressing steadily up his lower limbs, was due to the blood being drained from his system. The beast had told him in advance, had spoken of blood. And now—

Nooooooooooooooooooooo . . .

The silent scream lasted for an eternity. It lasted while the Cobra lost all feeling in his trunk and in his arms and, finally, when the red splash of death in his brain turned pink, then pale white, then extinguished altogether.

"You bastard!" Cam Sanchez said. He could not get up from the sitting position he had fallen to, could hardly raise his head to look into the eyes of the count, could hardly speak the two words that he nonetheless managed.

Dracula looked down at the husk of a body that he had let drop before him. When his face turned to gaze at Cam, it was the face of the imperious nobleman once again.

"If such are your parting words to me, I accept them," he said with a bow. "Perhaps I should say something of my sorrow in that your death appears imminent. But then that would not be completely honest, in that I care not personally whether you are alive or dead, Mr. Sanchez. Whatever state you choose is completely acceptable to me. I, however, have business in another place. The voice of my Ktara rings clearly in my mind. Your voice, even if it were to ring with pleas for me to save your soul, would have no effect. In truth, you are fortunate, Mr. Sanchez—fortunate that I chose to dine on another this night. I am satisfied for the time being. Are you amused?"

The last question was a result of Cam's choking laugh.

"Yeah. I'm amused . . . Count. I . . ." But he could not form the words that were to follow. He could no longer hold his body up. His face went to the earth.

Dracula's face was one of excellent humor. "Human nature is itself a fragile thing, Mr. Sanchez. I bid you good evening! I suppose I also should bid you goodbye. But goodbyes are filled with touching sadness, and I would rather my time be spent in enjoyable pursuits. Thus I shall not say goodbye, but only good evening."

He paused, looking down at the American. "Nothing in return? For shame, Mr. Sanchez. I know that Americans are not known for their civilized graces, but the least you could do is to respond in kind to my best wishes."

The count laughed. Then he was gone. There was the flapping of leathery wings in the clouded sky above, but below there was nothing. Nothing but the bodies of several men. Some were Indians, two were from the civilized world. All were dead, except for one.

And that one was getting closer to death by the second.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The fire was high now, higher than it had been before. Ktara huddled in the center of the circle, her arms wrapped around her knees. It was all she could do now to keep her head up, to keep her eyes on the movements at the top of the pyramid. Long ago, it seemed to her, she had given up trying to hold the rope more tightly, but from within the stone structure there came to her the impression of fierce exertion. It was dim now, but still there in the back of her mind. The professor was still alive, then, for to exert is to exist. But how long could he continue? That was one question, but there was another more serious one to ask:

How long would that third stake remain where it was?

The tribesman who carried the long knife waited patiently on the other side of the flames. His eyes, under that protective steel helmet, were directed at the place hers were trying to focus on. The top of the pyramid, where Kabaya and his new woman . . .

Kabaya had laughed as he threw their golden goblets down into the opening. She could not hear his words, but she knew they represented a taunt to Harmon. The time for drinking was over. Now it was time for Kabaya's second joining with his woman. And after that . . .

Soon. It would be so very soon. Even now the mental vibrations she was receiving from the top of the stone structure told her the time of fulfillment was nearing rapidly. There were no more than minutes left—perhaps seconds—before Kabaya would rise. And then with his hand, he would signal down to the one who waited—waited with that knife.

It was ending, just as her own strength was ending. Swiftly her powers had drained from her, and the end of the draining was now almost complete. Perhaps Kabaya had calculated the entire thing precisely. The end of Harmon to come at the same instant as her own end. And perhaps—perhaps now after all these many years—she was ready. An end, a final breath and then oblivion. Perhaps . . .

It took effort she didn't think she had, but she again lifted her eyes—this time higher than the pyramid. Straight up over her head. Because her ears or her mind had heard . . .

Yes, now she saw the airborne creature, high above her. And she heard his command. She knew that the

command was correct and necessary—but there was no way she could obey it!

I cannot! I have not the strength!

No, came agreement from above. It is therefore fortunate that the clouds are so thick.

Clouds? Thick? And then she understood. Earlier, the thought had occurred to her that she herself could have . . . But, then, she also knew that the professor's life was no more than the quick slash of a knife away. It still was, although now it was a stake the knife would slash rather than his throat—and now she no longer had the strength to put her idea into a welcome reality.

But *he*—

She could not see the eyes of the creature high in the sky, but she knew that their usually red centers now must be the brightest of white. There were faint flashes in the night, high above, then there was a greater flash that seemed for a quick instant to light up the entire heavens.

Lightning. Then the mighty crash of thunder. And then . . .

The rain.

It descended with such violence that it must have seemed that the mighty Amazon itself had suddenly been turned from its course and had rushed into the village. Ktara had been looking skyward when it fell, and now she choked on the waterfall that surrounded her. But the cold freshness on her face served to awaken her senses. And as she pushed herself upward from the ground, she saw that there no longer was a fire encircling her.

She saw that, and then the rain stopped. All at once, everywhere, it was gone. And now, on the top of the pyramid, Kabaya was on his feet. As lightning flashed

in the sky, his face, like that of the girl, was one of incomprehension—and fear!

Ktara's voice was stronger than she'd thought possible:

"Yes, Kabaya—*it is Dracu!* He has caused the storm that has freed me."

Kabaya pointed frantically at Ktara. "Take her!" he screamed.

She whirled at the group of eight men who hesitantly moved toward her. "Do not come closer. One more step and you will lose your lives—this is the warning of *Kaykattra!*"

They stopped—all but two of them. The two extended their arms forward, arms at the end of which were spears. They came at a run.

Ktara's eyes flashed with lightning. She did not look at them, but above them. And, as if in response to the flash in her eyes, there was another flash, this time of crashing lightning from the sky itself. By the time the thunder had roared through all the ears in the village, nothing remained of the two men except smoking ash.

"Do you dare to strike *me?*" Kabaya screamed.

"No, I do not," Ktara replied. "You are the tool of my Master. As such, you cannot be dealt with by such as myself."

Kabaya pointed to the frightened Pala. "Her, then. Do you strike at her?"

"No—because for her I have other plans. Nor will I strike down any more of your tribe, not unless they move against me." She turned to the wide-eyed people who feared to look at her. "You need have no fear of me—if you understand that you must not interfere. *Do you understand that?*"

There was no reply, but she knew they all under-

stood. Kabaya, however, did not:

"They obey *me!*" he thundered.

Ktara smiled. "You were asking *whom* I would strike. Your question is put badly, *traitorous servant!*"

For a moment Kabaya's face softened, the lines moving into a kind of amusement. "But, my lady, you contradict yourself. Earlier you said that I was not *your* servant, ever. Thus you really should mean that I am a traitor to Dracu."

"That is my meaning, yes."

"Then, traitorous though I may be, I still am no servant of his. You have forgotten *this*." He gestured to the high cross that stood behind him. "Dracu may not approach this place. I know it, you know it, and *he* knows it! Therefore, you have little in the way of options. All you can do is to be thankful you still live and to remove yourself from this place. That same advice I would give to your Master—if he could appear to receive it. But you and he go alone. You do not take my woman with you. And you do not take *him!*"

Kabaya's eyes swerved to the open pit. From the seat of one of the golden thrones, his right hand took something. Something that flashed of steel—his *knife!*

But Ktara's eyes flashed at the same moment. "Meet your destiny, Kabaya—*meet it now!*"

The brightness of the fireball—for that is what it seemed to all whose eyes were temporarily blinded by it—was as if a small sun had fallen from the heavens. When the avalanche of sound faded, sight began to be restored to the eyes. And it was then that they saw what had happened on the high pyramid. The fireball or lightning or whatever it was had struck the great golden cross—the cross whose skeleton consisted of a solid steel upright and arms. The gold had melted, the

steel cracked. What was not immediately obvious to all those who looked was very obvious to Kabaya:

The cross was no longer a cross.

He shrieked in fury, his knife hand slashing downward toward the rope that went down into the pit.

Suddenly the motion halted. Something blocked the movement—something blocked the downward sweeping forearm. It was a sharply upward-sweeping shin. It was surrounded by black material of the finest quality.

“Kabaya,” Count Dracula said genially. “It has been some time since last we met.” He looked briefly at the knife. “I would not bother with that instrument. We have other and more important things to discuss.”

“M-Master!” Kabaya said. The knife fell to the stone. Kabaya fell to his knees.

Dracula smiled. “And now you recognize the relationship between you and myself.”

“Dracu is merciful,” Kabaya said.

“Merciful.” Dracula repeated the adjective. Then he laughed. “Yes, Kabaya, I am merciful—as merciful as you! The man who hangs from the rope there—”

“I was about to end his misery. I was about to bring him up!” Kabaya’s eyes looked swiftly to where Ktara stood, as if prayerfully entreating her not to contradict him. But the vampire continued smiling.

“She need say nothing. You would have killed this man. Life means nothing to you, my old friend. Perhaps it is because I gave you eternal life. I did that, so that you could guard my gold.”

“And I *have* guarded it, Master. Look around you. It still remains where—”

“In the form of a cross!” Dracula boomed. Then his voice softened. “But what Dracu has given, Dracu can take away. How old are you, Kabaya? In *years*. Think

about that now—*now*, as those years take their toll upon your essence.”

“No! Please, Dracu—*no!*”

Kabaya screamed, but even before the scream had ended, the giant of a man with a fulsome musculature was turned into a man of eighty years. The cry rattled in his throat as the seconds passed. White hair turned to the thin consistency of a spider’s web, muscles shrank, bones protruded from every angle, every contact with what had been full flesh now had tightened into a thin, transparent, husklike substance that—

Suddenly snapped. At the shoulders, at the elbows, and knees.

“Noooo . . .”

“Speak more loudly, Kabaya,” Dracula said. “You who swore to serve me, speak up so that I might hear—ah, but now it is you who does not hear, is that not so?”

It was the nude Pala who screamed. Her eyes had taken in the swift transformation of the man with whom she had just made love, but it was only now that the full meaning of the pile of thin dust that surrounded the metal helmet on the stone roof slammed into her mind.

The count bowed. “You shall be dealt with when the time comes, woman. As for now . . .”

He moved to the open space. “Professor Harmon?”

Harmon’s eyes felt as if they were filled with blood. His own blood. His shoulders and arms were numb with strain. Still they were locked in the positions in which he had them—ninety-degree positions. His ribs felt as if they were going to be crushed from the rope that surrounded them. Death never had felt more close.

"Pull me up," he croaked.

"Pull you up?" the count asked. "Why should I do that?"

"If I die . . ."

Dracula laughed. "I know. If you die, I receive your magic splinter. If you *die*. But my Ktara communicates to me that you will not *die* if I do not assist you. True, if your arms give out you might suffer a bit from the little fish nibbling away at the bottoms of your legs, but then your legs are useless in any case, are they not?"

"That nibbling," Harmon said with effort. "That just might kill me."

A pause. "I have considered that, Professor. Yes, I believe you have a point. Allow me to assist you."

Harmon felt himself rising. When his eyes came to the level above the pit, he saw that Pala had his chair ready. He looked at the count.

"Do not fear," Dracula said. "She holds it at my request. Before, she might have pushed you and the chair into the thin air separating you from the piranhas. But now . . . she does as I wish. True, girl?"

"You speak only truth, Master," Pala replied as the count assisted Harmon into the chair. "You need only ask and I will obey."

Dracula nodded. "In which case, bring yourself—and your throat—to me now."

"No!"

Ktara's voice was sharp. She stood on the step half-way up the pyramid. "I ask you, Master. Do not slay her. She is the last of the three."

"And you concern yourself with these petty things?"

She did not answer immediately. The count continued:

"Why bother? Mr. Sanchez need no longer bother."

"He is . . . dead? Master—*answer me!*"

Harmon's eyes moved from one to the other. Cam dead? *Dead?* And then he received the answer to his question—immediately after Ktara received the answer to hers. Her eyes flashed, the slight hint of a smile at the corner of her lips. "Master . . ."

Dracula sighed. He looked at Harmon, then at Pala. "It is not to be, my dear. Not now, not here. I trust you will understand."

"I . . . understand," Pala said, her tone confessing that she did not at all understand.

Harmon's gut tightened. He understood. As he watched Ktara move quickly to the edge of the village where the trail entered the jungle, he reflected that he understood only too well.

Only too well.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Detective Lieutenant Hank Navarre looked across his battle-scarred desk at Sanchez, to the Ktara woman, and then to the one who was called Pala. He didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. Everything was just a bit too pat. But he'd better make sure everything was down on paper for the record.

He rose from his chair, leaving the others seated, and went to his office doorway. "Thompson. Get in here and take all this stuff down." When the short policeman with the notepad was seated in the corner, Navarre moved around to the front of his desk and

leaned against it. "Now, Mrs. Santos, I think we have to go over this again."

"I do not mind, Lieutenant. Ask your questions, I will answer them."

But there it was again, that faraway look that said it made little difference to her. Well, it made a difference to him. He asked his questions, first the usual ones concerning her name, the names of the others—the two men—and then down to the meat of the thing:

"You admit, then, to the murder of Dr. Wesley Thurlow and his wife?"

"Dr. Thurlow was killed by the Cobra. My husband's knife killed Mrs. Thurlow. But I accept responsibility for their deaths as well as the death of the student—"

"Tony Nelda."

"Yes."

"Why? What motive did you have to kill these three people?"

"They were thought to have possession of something I wanted. Dr. Thurlow should have had it, but he did not. The Tony Nelda one, he did have it. In his case, too, it was my husband's knife . . ."

Navarre didn't like it. She talked too freely, but it was as if she were in some kind of psychological shock. Or some kind of dream state. Hypnosis?

He turned to Sanchez. "All right. You and Miss Ktara can go."

Cam rose slowly from the chair. Navarre noticed that the Puerto Rican didn't look all too steady himself. There was something wrong with one of his legs, and his face looked somewhat pale. But that snide grin still was there.

"That's all, Lieutenant?" Cam asked.

"For now, Sanchez. For now."

When they had left the office, Navarre returned his attention to Pala. "You don't have to be frightened, Mrs. Santos."

She looked at him strangely. "But I am not frightened, Lieutenant."

"I don't mean frightened of me. I mean them." He looked at the door. "They can't get at you while you're here. If you are saying what you're saying because they told you—"

"I was told only to speak the truth. That is what I am doing. I have no reason to fear any of—of *them*."

"You speak of your own free will, then?"

"Yes."

"Your husband and the other man, the one you call the Cobra. Where are they?"

"Both are dead, I believe. I mean that I believe the Cobra is dead. I know that Santos is dead. I killed him."

"And the body? Where would that be?"

"I will not tell you that."

"Will you tell me where you were when Sanchez found you to bring you here?"

"No."

Navarre's hands clenched and unclenched. "All right, back to the first murders. You were saying that those people had something you wanted. What was it?"

"A book."

"What book?"

"An old book."

"Does it have a name? Is it a valuable book?"

"Most valuable, if one knows how to interpret its pages. Its name—I will not tell you that. I have promised not to tell you that."

Ah—*promised!*

“Promised? Promised who, Mrs. Santos? Sanchez or that Ktara—or Professor Harmon? Did they bind you in some way?”

She shook her head. “I would promise them nothing. Even if I did, I would not feel bound to keep such a promise.”

“Who, then?”

“I will not say.”

“This person—he was another accomplice in the killings?”

She laughed shortly, but her eyes still seemed not to be focusing on his, nor on anything else. “No, except perhaps for the Cobra, but then I do not know whether he is dead.”

But Navarre did have one fact. He had used the word *he* in describing the unknown person to whom her promise had been given. She accepted it. He tried another tack.

“I can’t figure something out, Mrs. Santos. You come in here and confess to three killings—four, including that of your husband. You do this freely, you say. But you refuse to elaborate on your reasons for committing these murders. Because of a promise, you say. I find it strange that this man to whom you have made this promise would allow you to be brought here. Since he has, I find it doubly strange that you would feel bound by your promise.”

Pala smiled wistfully. “It is not strange, not that part of it. He told me I must come and tell you the truth of the killings. But he also said I should not worry about the consequences. I will not stand trial, you see.”

“The hell you won’t, lady!” Navarre countered. He saw it all now, all right. The wealth of Damien Har-

mon. It had cheated justice before, but not this time.

He turned to the man with the pad. "Have her booked and given a cell all to her own. Then get those notes typed up. Nobody sees her—nobody—until I get to see them first. You got that?"

The man with the pad had it. When the woman had been ushered from Navarre's office, the detective sat back into his chair. He brooded over the cold cup of coffee that had been hot when the three of them had entered.

Mrs. Santos. A ruthless looking bitch, all right. Probably guilty. The story all fit, but . . .

Sanchez. Maybe this time he was clean. This time. Navarre could see why the Puerto Rican would have gone after the killers himself. With the law convinced he was the murderer—or one of them—he had little choice. Well, if the woman *was* guilty, then he had done a good job of it. With help, of course.

Damien Harmon. The money that had spoken before had no doubt spoken again. But money was only part of it, Navarre was sure.

Ktara. There was something very special about this woman, but it was difficult to pinpoint. The strange colored eyes, the way she held herself—like some kind of animal ready to pounce.

And then there was that other. The man Mrs. Santos wouldn't identify. The man she said had told her she did not have to worry, that she would not have to stand trial.

Navarre had absent-mindedly raised the coffee cup to his lips. He shuddered. He told himself it was because of the cold liquid that he had tasted. That's what he told himself, but he didn't really believe it.

She sat upright on the cot provided in her cell, her eyes staring vacantly before her, not moving at all until there brushed against her face a wave of cool night air. She smiled then, and she stood.

"Master. You have come."

He stood in the darkened corner of the cell. He spoke softly, but in the rich tones that thrilled her mind and body.

"I am here, yes. Are you surprised by my coming?"

"No, Master. You told me you would come."

"You realize why I have come?"

"To make me your slave, Master. To give me what you gave to Kabaya, who did not deserve the gift, whose mind was too small to understand the greatness of the gift, and whose spirit was too small to serve the Master properly."

She had stepped forward and now stood in his shadow. Her head was thrown back, her throat offered upward toward his lips. "Make me immortal, Master. Together we shall show the world the meaning of superiority. We shall—"

"We," the count repeated softly. "*We?* I believe you have misunderstood the purpose of my coming."

The eyes that had been half-closed now clicked open. "But . . . but you promised, Master! You said—"

"*You* promised, Pala. I said only that you did not have to fear the justice of man. Perhaps in a moment you will realize why that is so."

The shock of fear wrenched her mind, sent waves of ice through her spinal column. Her wide eyes tried to pierce the shadows, to see that noble face, the features that surrounded those tiny red pinpoints of burning fire. Perhaps sensing her attempt, he shifted his position, shifting hers as well, so that she could see—

The scream was very loud.

But it lasted for only a moment.

By the time the first of the guards arrived outside the bars, there was nothing to see except the woman's body, lying on its back on the stone floor, its neck bent to the side in an unusual manner, the face very pale, the eyes wide with terror. There was nothing or no one else within the cell.

The vampire had gone, his business finished, his blood feast completed.

DRACULA

HORROR SERIES

by Robert Lory

Professor Harvey's visit to ancient Transylvania begins a new expedition into the bloodthirsty realm of the world's most fearsome character!

And so Professor Charles Harvey and his assistant, Eric Frommann, introduce the magic of modern technology into the vampire heart of the dreaded Count Dracula. What evil reincarnation have they wrought? What wicked deeds will this demon from the darkest depths of horror perpetrate now? Come, open the coffin with us!

Order	Title	Book #	Price
_____	#1 DRACULA RETURNS!	P184	.95
_____	#2 THE HAND OF DRACULA	P200	.95
_____	#3 DRACULA'S BROTHERS	P225	.95
_____	#4 DRACULA'S GOLD	P256	.95
_____	#5 THE DRUMS OF DRACULA	P322	.95
_____	#6 THE WITCHING OF DRACULA	P398	.95
_____	#7 DRACULA'S LOST WORLD	P508	1.25
AND MORE TO COME . . .			

TO ORDER

Please check the space next to the book/s you want, send this order form together with your check or money order, include the price of the book/s and 25¢ for handling and mailing to:

PINNACLE BOOKS, INC. / P.O. Box 4347
Grand Central Station / New York, N.Y. 10017

☐ CHECK HERE IF YOU WANT A FREE CATALOG

I have enclosed \$_____ check _____ or money order _____
as payment in full. No C.O.D.'s

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

(Please allow time for delivery)

GREAT GOTHIC READING FOR THE DISCRIMINATING WOMAN

THE GREAT STONE HEART, by Mona Farnsworth. An exciting romance set in old Santa Fe at the turn of the century—the story of a young girl who comes to the colorful desert town to work as a model to a famous sculptress, and finds mystery and death. **P022—95¢**

THE BELLS OF WIDOWS' BAY, by Mirlam Lynch. This richly textured tale takes its heroine, Lisa Meredith, through a web of intrigue, love and betrayal. It is set on a remote island, Widows' Bay, where her fiance has taken her on a weekend's visit. You'll find one climax after another in this exciting story. **P049—95¢**

DUELING OAKS, by Daniella Dorsett. A whirlwind romance leads Deanna to the altar and an elegant Southern plantation, but the glamour soon turns to terror at the point of her husband's sword. Set in New Orleans right after the Civil War, this suspenseful and romantic novel will enthrall you. **P074—95¢**

WHERE SHADOWS LIE, by Mirlam Lynch. This is the story of Elizabeth Lyman, a lovely New England girl. She is a descendant of an old American Family. The scene is set in a small town just outside of Boston where Elizabeth's great-aunts live in a foreboding mansion, Gray House. Mystery follows mystery in this chilling, yet romantic, novel. **P086—95¢**

BLUE MARSH, by Thelma René Bernard. Aurelie Martin, a lovely young orphan in search of excitement and romance, is travelling alone, on her way to a new home, when she meets a handsome and wealthy stranger. She's charmed by him, and somehow, becomes involved in a sinister plot. Her dreams of fulfillment and love seem about to be dashed on the rocks of despair . . . when she discovers that there's a way out of her haunted existence. A Pinnacle Great Gothic, in large type, of course. **P105—95¢**

A CROSS FOR TOMORROW, by Mona Farnsworth. Another Great Pinnacle Gothic, set in large type. Margaret Alden's gone to visit her school friend, Elaine, who has married into an old aristocratic Latin family. The unusual mystique of the place begins to give way to violence . . . and murder. Margaret becomes enmeshed in the rituals of an ancient and secret religious cult known as Penitentes. A strange and mysterious story. **P106—95¢**

NIGHTMARE'S MORNING, by Miriam Lynch. A new, original large-type Gothic romance—with a bizarre twist. This is the story of Ellen Barclay, a young secretary. She's been hired by an author to aid him in research and manuscript preparation. They are to spend much of their time in an old New England mansion known as Shadowlawn. The mansion is infamous as the site of a brutal multiple murder more than eighty years ago. On the very first day strange things begin to occur, and it is soon apparent that history may be repeating itself. Will murder be next?
P110—95¢

STARCROSSED ROAD, by Mona Farnsworth. Here is an unusual and haunting Gothic novel of suspense, set in modern times, and written by one of our most popular authors. It tells the story of Elizabeth Wainwright, who left her conservative Boston home to travel across the United States to join the strange household of Miranda Field, who lived in Oregon. There were three men living there and two other women—but not a soul she could trust. Chilling romance, from the author of *THE GREAT STONE HEART* and *A CROSS FOR TOMORROW*.
P162—95¢

RENDEZVOUS IN PEKING, by Anne-Mariel. An absorbingly real novel of love and terror—a novel that will transport every reader to the subtle and sensual atmosphere of the Orient. When Marie-Laure, the heroine, attempts to free her husband from Red China, where he is being held on a charge of murdering his first wife, she encounters a world both dream and nightmare. Newly-wed, she learns much about her husband after he is taken from her which both frightens and intrigues her; then she is forced to masquerade as the wife of a Communist Chinese Colonel, with whom she falls in love.
P187—95¢

THE EVIL THAT WAITED, by Mona Farnsworth. After Daphne Partridge's parents were killed in a tragic automobile accident, she was forced to leave the small New England town where she had always lived. In 1904, a young girl of good breeding but no money had little choice except to find a relative who would take her in. She was prepared to work and to accept the customary sympathy. However, she could never have been prepared for the chilling and haunting experiences that awaited her at the home of her distant cousin.
P211—95¢

MOONSHADOW MANSION, by Thelma René Bernard. An unusual and romantic gothic set in England. When Destiné, a young governess who has been deserted by her only relative, is forced to take a job in a remote manor in the north of England, she finds mystery and despair. Hearing strange noises, Destiné and her young charge begin to explore together. They find more mystery . . . and eventually, death. Frightened as she is, Destiné knows she cannot stop now. She must find out who the murderer is before she, or the child she has grown to love, become victims. The suspense builds to a spine-tingling climax when she finds there are others living in the manor too! **P222—95¢**

AFRAID OF THE DARK, by Mary Linn Roby. Hoping to find some excitement and romance to break up the boredom of her monotonous life, Laura Cassell saves for years for a cruise to Rio de Janeiro. On the eve of her departure, she returns to her Boston apartment to find her brother brutally beaten. He tells her that the assailants had actually been waiting there to kill her. If she could get to the ship and out of the country, she would be safe, however, Laura discovers that she has walked into a far more dangerous trap than the one which she has fled, a nightmare of terror and death. **P311—95¢**

THE DEVIL'S HOUSE, by Julia Tremonte. A modern-day tale, skillfully blended with the occult. When her husband strangely disappears, Sally Taylor is left alone—or so she thinks—in the old, timeworn house. Suddenly she hears eerie, hypnotic chanting coming from the cellar. Abruptly, the lights go out and a yellowish glow illuminates the blackness of the house. Mesmerized, she descends into the cellar. Terror mounts to a chilling climax as Sally faces a deadly diabolical force. **P317—95¢**

**This is your Order Form . . .
Just clip and mail.**

_____P022	THE GREAT STONE HEART	.95
_____P049	THE BELLS OF WIDOW'S BAY	.95
_____P074	DUELING OAKS	.95
_____P086	WHERE SHADOWS LIE	.95
_____P105	BLUE MARSH	.95
_____P106	A CROSS FOR TOMORROW	.95
_____P110	NIGHTMARE'S MORNING	.95
_____P162	STARCROSSED ROAD	.95
_____P187	RENDEZVOUS IN PEKING	.95
_____P211	THE EVIL THAT WAITED	.95
_____P222	MOONSHADOW MANSION	.95
_____P311	AFRAID OF THE DARK	.95
_____P317	THE DEVIL'S HOUSE	.95

TO ORDER

Please check the space next to the book/s you want, send this order form together with your check or money order, include the price of the book/s and 25¢ for handling and mailing to:

**PINNACLE BOOKS, INC. / P.O. Box 4347
Grand Central Station / New York, N.Y. 10017**

☐ Check here if you want a free catalog.

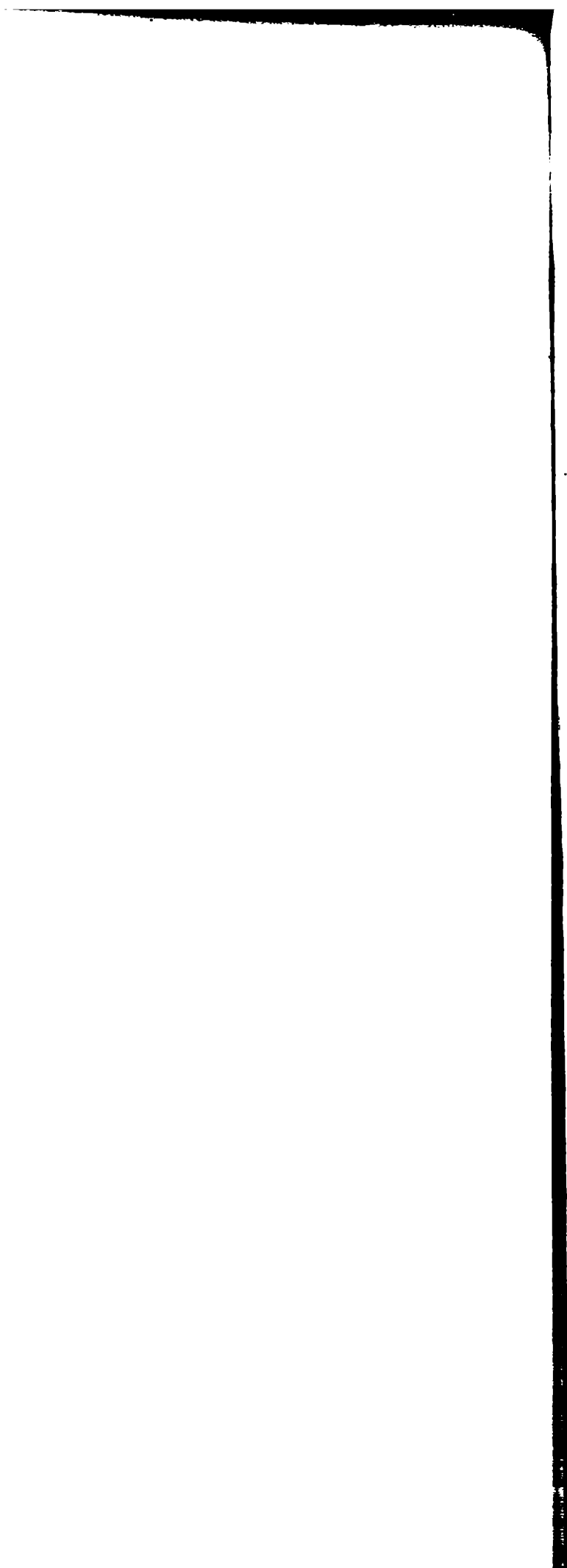
I have enclosed _____ check _____ or money order _____
as payment in full. No C.O.D.'s.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

(Please allow time for delivery.)



Black Forces

It is a most unnatural night. Black, rainy, and cold. The kind of cold that penetrates the bones. Like death.

A middle-aged couple walk to their apartment. In the dim hall the light casts a macabre pattern on their faces. The faces of corpses at the stroke of midnight. The man feels suffocated by a sense of impending doom. He shudders, secretly hoping that he will be alive in the morning. A strange thought, indeed... He turns his key in the lock and slowly opens the door. Suddenly his wife gasps, and he turns pale with terror. They have seen something in the blackness beyond the door. Something horrifying. Like death!

Then they hear the voice: "Come inside, both of you. Please. Kindly do as I say—or you both will die where you stand!"

This is the seventh volume in the unwholesomely horrible Dracula Series, original tales of legendary wickedness and modern-day suspense. The key to Dracula's twentieth-century reincarnation is the brilliant scientist Dr. Damien Harmon. By means of a fantastic electronic implant, Professor Harmon is able to control the actions of Dracula in all his grim guises. Then, too, there are the eerie lady known as Ktara and the faithful giant, Cam. Together they will transport you into the shadowy realm of the unreal for a feast of blood-bright horror! Come along for mystery and murder in a jugular vein!